

A woman with dark hair tied back is sitting in a lotus position on a light-colored mat. She is wearing a white spaghetti-strap crop top and black shorts with a white drawstring. Her eyes are closed, and her hands are resting on her knees in a mudra. In front of her, on the mat, are several dark, smooth stones and a small black dish containing red rose petals. The background shows a swimming pool and a hazy, mountainous landscape under a clear blue sky.

...AND BREATHE

*Week-long retreats for aficionados,
or luxury resorts for beginners
— there's a yoga holiday to suit*



Rebecca Smith went to Marsh Farm in West Sussex for an all-abilities yoga retreat

Approaching the sixteenth-century Marsh Farm for my yoga retreat, I felt a stab of apprehension. It had been years since my last yoga class, but my fears about being inept were laid to rest as soon as I stepped inside this beautiful old country house. My fellow guests were gathered round the Aga in the cosy kitchen, and Sally Parkes, who runs the retreats, welcomed me warmly. It turned out the guests' abilities ranged from beginners upwards.

In our pre-dinner Hatha class, the atmosphere was warm and inclusive and Sally's teaching was permeated with a sense of fun. I was sure I could actually hear my body creaking into life, and it felt great to stretch and breathe. The large windows look out onto a perfect peaceful English country garden – where rabbits hop and a horse peers over the gate.

Later, the chatter round the dinner table died down as the food appeared and we ate in appreciative silence. The menu is vegetarian, wheat- and dairy-free – but it is a joy. We enjoyed risotto with asparagus and cherry tomatoes, vegetable tagine, sun-



ABOVE: Sally Parkes teaches an al fresco yoga class
BELOW: The tranquil setting of Porto Elounda

dried tomato scones – the meals are a focal point.

As the classes rolled on through the weekend, my body remembered postures that were familiar years before, and I felt the glimmerings of flexibility. My mind and its internal chatter started to still more easily, too, and during a dynamic morning class on the final day I experienced a surge of pride as my body started to feel just a little stronger.

I came away from the weekend feeling two inches taller and 10 times calmer. It has given me the confidence I need to attend yoga classes back home.

sallyparkesyoga.com



Perri Lewis visited Porto Elounda in Crete for a beginners' yoga holiday

The thing about traditional yoga holidays is that you can't very well take your rugby-loving, anti-yoga boyfriend. Porto Elounda, a luxury resort on the north-east coast of Crete, was a brilliant

way to get around this hurdle. While I stretched at hour-long daily classes, he could take advantage of the private beach and jet skis. As I indulged in massages at the Six Senses spa, he could entertain himself on the golf course. And after I'd finally ached the 'elephant' pose, we could celebrate together with a glass of wine in the al fresco hotel bar nestled in the rocks or take the bus to Agios Nikolaos and feast on mezze at a restaurant overlooking the lake.

Should you want to, you can choose the detox eating plan or enrol on a week-long retreat with yoga tutors. But as a complete beginner, I was wary of throwing myself into anything too intense.

My private sessions were perfect. On a secluded platform looking across the ocean, I mastered Hatha basics with Crystie, my incredibly patient tutor. She pushed me just enough so that I felt a real difference in my flexibility and strength by the end of the week. On returning home, I finally signed up to the local class I've been walking past for the past six months.

Flexible Fitness at Porto Elounda costs from £1,339 per person with Wellbeing Escapes (wellbeingescapes.co.uk)

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PHOTOGRAPH: ALI WARDLE



Louise Chunn visited Shanti-Som in Marbella for a luxury yoga break in the sun

I'd never been on a yoga retreat before as they always sounded a bit frugal for my tastes. Where was the fun in being deprived? But Shanti-Som, in the hills above Marbella, promised luxury accommodation, great food – and lots of yoga. The buildings are quasi-Thai design, surrounded by pines and greenery. The feeling is of a top-notch south-east Asian spa, without the long-haul trip.

I have done yoga, on and off, since I was a teenager, and there aren't many types I haven't tried. My aim was to improve my postures, try some of the ones that had always rather frightened me, and continue my struggle to switch off from work.

The first of two daily yoga classes – in a beautiful, open pavilion – started at 8am and the sun rose around us as for the next hour and a half we devoted ourselves to the practice. The teacher excelled at Vinyasa, so we were always on the move, our bodies becoming warmer and warmer as we worked.

I swam, walked, read, had an ayurvedic massage, but mostly I simply sat and relaxed, entirely. Shanti-Som may look like a hotel, but mercifully it lacks the bustle. The pace is slow and each room has either a private garden or a balcony overlooking the valley. There was a real serenity in this place. In a late afternoon class, the teacher wanted us to stretch our bodies, but float our minds. It was strongly meditative and my level of relaxation seemed unusually deep.

Back home, with my body feeling firmer and stronger, I'm inspired to get back to regular yoga practice. I wouldn't say Shanti-Som made me better at yoga, but it did make me want to stick with it.

shantisom.com



Clare Longrigg went to Castel Monastero in Tuscany for a relaxed retreat

Castel Monastero is not your typical health resort. It rises out of the Tuscan hills like a Bertolucci film set, surrounded by vineyards and acres of unspoilt woodland. In the golden late afternoon, guests who had spent the day feasting their eyes on the architecture of nearby Siena were stretched out like cats by the infinity pools. We had a stunning view from our bathroom window, and a long soak in the bath gazing over the rolling landscape was magically healing.

Yoga sessions took place every morning before most guests were up, and the surroundings helped relax the mind. By 8am it was already warm, and the muslin curtains hanging over the open sides of the yoga centre fluttered in the breeze. As a novice, I found the session demanding but not too difficult.

Some of the guests were in the middle of a full detox programme, and loitered to share their experience. The rest of us scooted along to breakfast in the sunny courtyard under huge white umbrellas, feasting on fruit and pastries, coffee and eggs.

This is a profoundly peaceful place, where you can meditate or swim, accompanied only by darting swallows, or take a long solitary walk along the country lanes. A sumptuous dinner based on truffle dishes sent us into a deep slumber, so we were glad to get up early for our next gentle yoga session, and feel stretched, focused and profoundly rested.

Three nights at Castel Monastero (castelmonastero.com) cost from £1,190 per person, including breakfast, flights and car hire, with Abercrombie & Kent (abercrombiekent.co.uk)

ABOVE: Striking a pose at Shanti-Som.
BELOW: The stunning Castel Monastero



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES