

A holiday for your health

Health-focused holidays are on the up. And with many of us living longer than ever before, it pays to invest in your health. Writer Alice Dogruyol discovers how to get fitter, eat better and lose weight while doing it at health holiday specialists The Body Retreat in Dorset.

Daily guided country walks are a highlight for many on the retreat.



The workouts were intense but short – perfect for me!

The Body Retreat was founded in 2010 by Juls Abernethy (right) and Julie Brealy (far right).



I had been struggling to manage my blood sugar levels and motivate myself to exercise; I was in a vicious cycle of eating the wrong things and feeling extremely fatigued. My weight had plateaued, and I needed a complete mind and body reset. So I booked into The Body Retreat, a women-only weight loss retreat in Dorchester, in the hope it would be the catalyst for change that I so needed.

Arriving at Dorchester train station, I jumped into a taxi with two other women who were also heading to the

retreat. They were both “returners”; having been there several times before, they couldn’t wait to get started on their annual retreat – and neither could I. In fact, one woman had extended her retreat to a second consecutive week as she had loved the first one so much.

We arrived at the beautiful sprawling stone farmhouse where we quickly settled in and Juls Abernethy and Julie Brealy, The Body Retreat co-founders, warmly welcomed us into the luxurious, cosy living room. Then, in front of a roaring open fire they

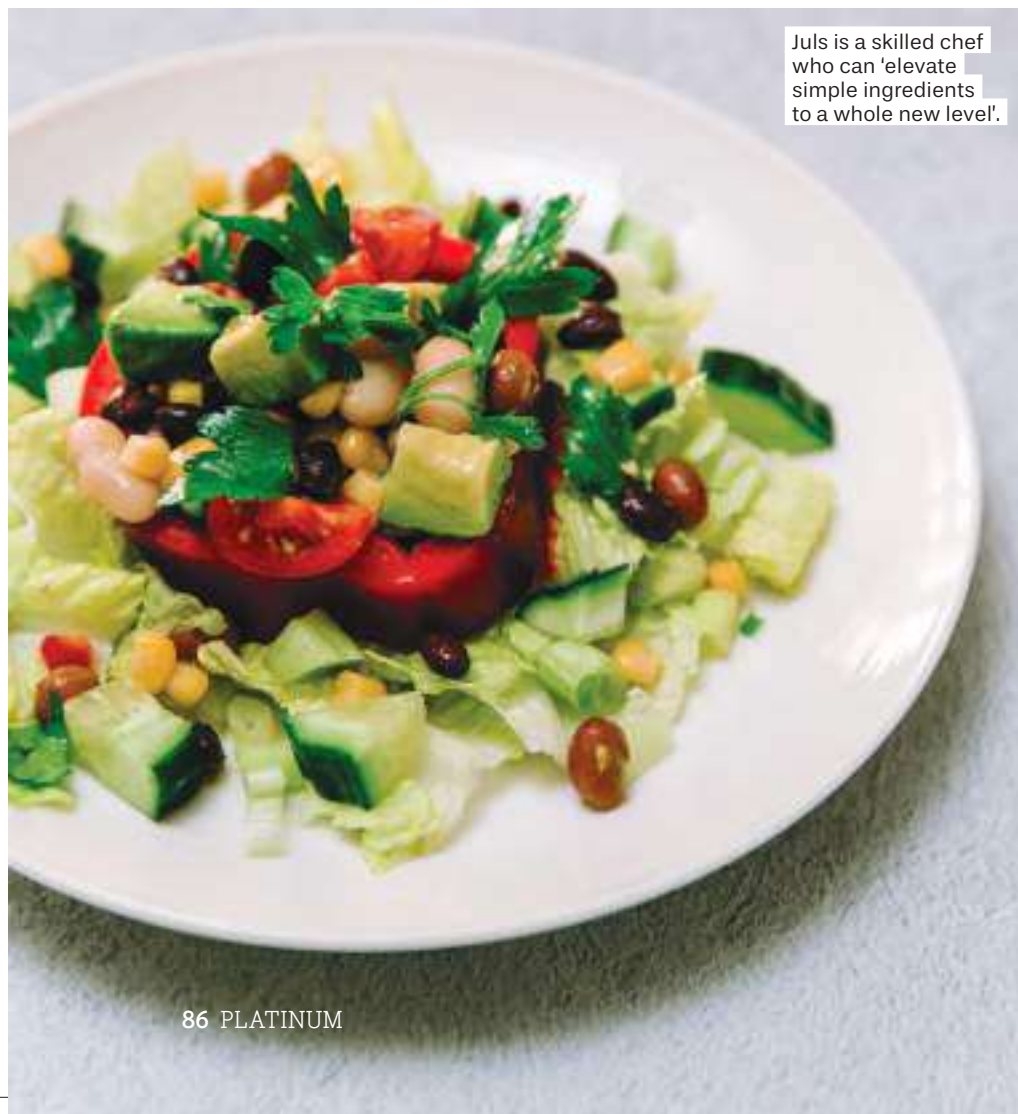


WORDS: ALICE DOGRUYOL.
IMAGES: THE BODY RETREAT.



'I learned that balance in all aspects of my physical and emotional life was possible'

Healthy meals are prepared with your dietary requirements in mind.



Juls is a skilled chef who can 'elevate simple ingredients to a whole new level'.

talked us through what to expect over the next week.

Any anxieties I had about the trip began to melt away and I quickly felt reassured that I was exactly where I needed to be. The location was stunning, the bed was super-comfortable and the small group of women was lovely. The philosophy and programme at The Body Retreat was exactly what I hoped it would be; everything was designed around female biology – based on eating better and moving smarter while nurturing emotional health.

I wondered: would this place finally help me reclaim my body and resolve my complicated relationship with food? I was excited to find out...

INCREDIBLE FOOD

That night, we enjoyed a welcome dinner of a delicious Mediterranean bean stew on a bed of rocket with feta crumbles. And it's no surprise that the food on offer was exemplary, as Juls not only runs the retreat but is a professional and exceedingly talented chef with a profound understanding of nutrition. She managed to elevate

healthy, unprocessed, simple ingredients to a whole new level that I didn't think was possible! Her passion for food and flavour was evident in every dish and there was always a thoughtful extra touch in each perfectly balanced meal. Her wild garlic pesto and halloumi salad was a sensation – better than I've eaten in any restaurant in the world.

Everyone's food preferences and dietary requirements were catered to. I wanted a lower-carb diet than the others, while some didn't want dairy or gluten. We were all listened to and served three beautifully prepared meals and a snack each day.

I'd stopped drinking coffee on the run up to the retreat, but nonetheless, everyone was offered a cup of freshly brewed organic black coffee every morning, from which I managed to happily abstain.

During the week, we attended insightful talks on food and nutrition where Juls debunked diet myths, cleared up confusion around weight management and explained her 80/20 rule. Juls encourages women to follow healthy food rules 80 per cent of the time with 20 per cent leeway, because she recognises that we aren't robots



You'll enjoy three balanced meals plus a snack every day, so there's no feeling of restriction on the retreat.



Juls has trained at one of the UK's leading cookery schools and has a profound understanding of nutrition.



Exercise classes on the retreat include Pilates, kettlebells, circuits and dance.

and can't be perfect all the time when it comes to food choices.

Two words never uttered on the retreat were "diet" or "restriction". The Body Retreat has a very clear food philosophy coined by Juls as "conscious cooking", which is about making conscious choices at every stage of the food journey. As a neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) master, behaviour coach and hypnotherapist she was adept at making us all think about what we eat, when we eat, how we eat and why we eat. This was the first retreat I had attended that took a deep dive into all the complex aspects of food I've struggled with for so long.

Part of our daily practice at the dinner table was to chew slowly,

put our cutlery down in-between each bite and to always leave a small piece of food on our plate – three things I rarely do at home. It was amazing how much fuller and better I felt just doing these three simple things at each meal.

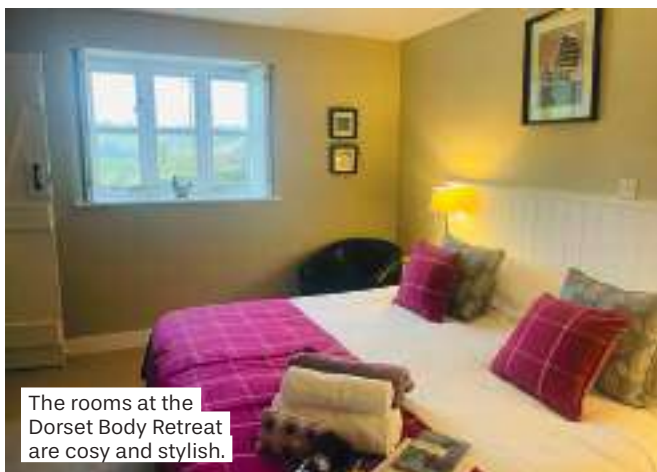
THE MAGIC OF MOVEMENT

I'm not at my fittest or in the best shape of my life, so I was worried I might not be able to cope with the daily exercise, but thankfully there was no pressure to attend all the activities. Much to my delight, the exercise classes were delivered in 15-20-minute bursts, occasionally a little longer, which was a revelation to me. Contrary to popular belief, you

don't have to slog it out at the gym for an hour to achieve a good energy burn, exercise can actually be fast and fun! Recent research all points to 15 minutes of intense activity being more effective than prolonged gentler exercise, which is music to my ears.

Julie, a personal trainer, weight management specialist, former semi-pro sportswoman and ultra-marathon runner, designed and delivered our morning workouts. They weren't too gruelling or intimidating like other bootcamps I've been to in the past. The classes varied each day: kettlebells, circuits, dance, Pilates, yoga, swimming and water aerobics.

As well as the short, intense bursts of exercise, we did daily, guided



The rooms at the Dorset Body Retreat are cosy and stylish.



Guests can gather in the living room, where Juls gives insightful talks.

Fitness classes on the retreat are run by Julie and are both welcoming and fun.



country walks with Julie and these were a personal highlight. Some stumps were more challenging than others; plodding uphill through muddy fields was tricky at times but reaching the top of a hill and looking out over rolling green countryside was breathtaking. To be in such unspoiled nature was incredibly uplifting and the feeling of accomplishment after completing a 10k walk was a real confidence boost. The walks varied in length and difficulty, but I managed to complete all of them.

I had fallen out of the habit of taking daily walks and it reminded me how invigorating and energising walking in nature can be. I wasn't as speedy as the others, but we all caught up with each other at meeting points and had lovely bonding chats as we meandered through the stunning woods, slopes and valleys.

HOLISTIC HEALTH

For me, I believe most of my weight gain is rooted in my emotions. As a young child, I started comforting myself with food to survive the pain of losing my grandmother, and the habit followed me into adulthood. In my case, as a type 1 diabetic, I also have significant hormonal imbalances that impact my hunger levels, energy levels, feelings of fullness and fat

storage, making weight loss and exercise even more challenging than normal. So, it was a relief to learn that Juls really understands how emotions impact our food choices and she tackled this head on during the week by giving insightful fireside talks exploring the ways we relate to food. She did a great job of removing the stress from eating and making it a joyful experience. Her group hypnosis session, which was centred around self-love, nourishment and putting you back in control of your health, was a powerful end to the retreat.

Throughout our stay, we all had the opportunity to experience some truly pampering massages, facials and sessions in an amazing contraption called The Body Ballancer®. It is a lymphatic drainage compression garment that you slip into, lie back, then let it gently roll over your body. It helps increase circulation and decongest fluid build-up in your legs, hips, tummy and bottom. It is used by athletes to aid recovery and avoid delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS). It is said to accelerate the removal of waste products and excess fluid via the lymphatic system, reducing the appearance of cellulite and improving skin tone while giving you a super-relaxing massage. I loved it! I would happily have done it every

day. In fact, I have been fantasising about having one at home, but I would have to win the lottery to make that dream a reality.

THE RESULTS

By the end of the week, I had lost a whopping four kilos, which was almost nine pounds in seven days. I'd also lost several centimetres from my waist, legs, hips and arms, which felt amazing. I'd been weighing myself on my Withings Body Scan scales, which I'd taken with me; it showed my fat reducing and muscle increasing daily, as well as a reduction in visceral fat – it was amazing to see those trends emerging and all while eating three meals and a snack a day.

But by the end of the retreat, I wasn't so bothered about the numbers on the scales as I was feeling empowered, motivated and proud of myself for completing the week. I was chewing my food more slowly, eating consciously and exercising every day.

A week at The Body Retreat gave me the best blood sugar readings I have had in the past two years: I was 96 per cent in range for the first time since being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes – it was a thrill every time I scanned my FreeStyle Libre glucose monitor to see it in the happy green zone. I learned that balance in all aspects of my physical and emotional life was possible. The things I was reminded of, the new things I learned, and the beautiful people I met, will stay with me for a long time. I expect I too will become a "returner" – and I can't wait to go back.



● The Body Retreat is located in Dorset. To find out more about what the retreat offers and to book a stay, visit the thebodyretreat.co.uk. Prices start from £2,150.