

THE  TIMES

# LUXXX



Design & travel issue



# Marginal gains, maximum health

The sporting excellence concept that is being applied to bodies and minds at a shaggy-on-the-outside/sleek-on-the-inside Icelandic retreat. By *Alice B-B*



**H**ANG ON! DON'T flick past this page because you're a high-achieving, hard-working, fast-living, not-really-a-spa person. Because... I've found the one for you. Let me just dangle this before your go-getting nose: personal aggregated gains. In pristine, remote Iceland. With no one telling you to "just relax". Added bonus – you might see the northern lights. Sound good to you?

The regime is called Eleven Life and takes place at Deplar Farm. The former sheepcroft is a cluster of green-roofed cabins, disguising 13 suites and swanky interiors beneath majestic volcanic peaks in the middle of snowy nowhere. It's famed for

heli-skiing in winter and salmon fishing in summer, and is part of Eleven Experience, a collection of super-luxe hotels in zippy places for adventure thrills. The group is owned by Chad Pike, the senior managing director of Blackstone asset management, so this was never going to be a wafty wellness programme.

Remember how Team GB's cyclists went from being a bit duff to Olympic champions? That was the result of the marginal gains concept: if you break down every little thing that goes into riding a bike and improve each element by 1 per cent, you'll have a significant increase when you clump the gains together. Eleven Life borrows the cycling

#### RESTORATIVE NATURE

Deplar Farm's rustic appearance belies its chic interiors. Opposite: the geothermal pool; cross-country skiing in the vicinity; the yoga studio





blueprint to turn its guests into lifestyle champions. And I'm one of the first to try it, alongside a group of (rather sceptical) American businessmen.

The daily itinerary is left in my snuggly bedroom, where the mini-bar has been stripped of naughtiness and stocked with homemade energy balls, raw chocolate and mountain-moss tea. Each day starts with a functional fitness class on a ten-minute loop, so no problem if you're on an urgent work call. Just drop in when you're ready.

Let me wax a tiny bit lyrical here. Deplar's interiors are stunning, but the floor-to-ceiling windowed spa area is next level: the gym has shiny Viking battle weapons on the wall, the indoor/outdoor geothermal pool has an in-built "elf" bar (54 per cent of Icelandic people believe elves might exist) and there's an outdoor Viking sauna beside a 4C plunge pool for a Wim Hof-style fire-and-ice experience.

This is not bootcamp. It's suggested we follow the 80-20 rule: 80 per cent whole food, 20 per cent soul food (thank God, because Gardar Gardarsson, the resident chef, was voted Iceland's top chef this year). Breakfast is ginger shots, homemade sourdough toast with a spring-onion omelette and green-seed porridge.

Then it's outdoor activities, maximising on the purest of fresh air: cross-country skiing across a frozen lake or snow-shoeing along a cascading waterfall. In the summer you can go river swimming, sea kayaking or wild walking, while foraging for Arctic thyme and blueberries.

Alongside all of that, according to your initial consultation, there is massage (I wasn't expecting her to be a shamanic healer who belched the trauma and bad energy out of me), floatation pod sessions (600kg of salt that helps to balance the adrenals and, because you can't see or hear and don't know where is the beginning or the end, is

possibly the closest to feeling infinity) and the ancient therapy of gong baths. The vibrational sound is said to encourage deep relaxation – one of the burnt-out businessmen emerges looking like a 12-year-old boy again.

However, this is what you've been waiting for: the gains. The itinerary is peppered with challenges. On the first night we're asked to sniff and identify four essential oils. It gets healthily competitive. The programme leader explains that losing your sense of smell is one of the first signs of Alzheimer's disease and that Barry Smith, a professor at the University of London, suggests smelling four essential oils each morning to improve memory and cognitive function. That evening a little bag of oils is on my desk, alongside a Filofax-style organiser in

## *"One of the burnt-out businessmen emerges looking like a boy again"*

which the gain is explained, alongside suggestions on how to make it a habit.

The next night the challenge is to stare at a candle's flame without blinking. I don't even make five seconds. We try again after some breathwork – simply ten deep inhales and exhales – and the result is amazing. One of our gang hits the two-minute mark. We hear how this kind of breathing can work in our pressured lives, whether for a meeting or public-speaking engagement. The programme leaders are careful not to scare us with New Age stuff. High achievers are receptive to alertness instead of mindfulness, breathwork rather than pranayama, and focus in lieu of meditation. Clever.

Some of the gains are generic (end your shower with a 90-second cold blast of water, which the

Academic Medical Center in Amsterdam found boosts immunity by up to 30 per cent), while others are individually tailored. For example, I find a training regime hard while travelling, so a skipping rope is delivered to my room (Arizona State University discovered that ten minutes of skipping is as good for cardiovascular efficiency as a 30-minute jog). It is suggested that my new habit is to always have that skipping rope in my suitcase.

Another issue: my balance is terrible. Later, in my gains file, I discover the science from Hamburg University that says that balance training significantly improves memory and spatial cognition. The suggestion: stack a habit on to a habit, by doing one-legged balance poses twice a day while brushing my teeth. The recommended brushing time is two minutes twice a day, which adds up to 28 minutes of balance training a week. Before leaving Deplar I am given a handy mnemonic to remember my personalised 11 gains, which, when aggregated, will help me to feel better, do better, be better.

On the last night I'm ready for bed, when I get the best hotel-door-knock of my life. A staff member whispers: "Northern lights!" I whip off my PJs, slip on a bikini, race down the corridor and leap into the steaming geothermal pool. Surrounded by virgin snow, I watch the solar wind making mysterious dancing lights overhead. It's the final and priceless gain, reminding me how extraordinary the world is and of the need to honour my place here by being the best possible version of myself. So there: I hope you're glad you didn't skip to the next page.

*Eleven Life at Deplar Farm (elevenexperience.com) costs from £1,750 a room full-board a night (based on two people sharing) and includes an in-depth consultation and wellness programme, all activity gear and round-trip transfers to Akureyri airport*