

Forget lounging by the pool sipping a Mai Tai— what about a week of wild boar runs, bush crawls, hill-sprints, dead tree lifting and spear-throwing?

A new concept in wellness holidays not only has guests enjoying a week of physical activity in exotic locations such as Mexico, Australia or Senegal, but also requires them to sign up for a four-week training programme in Ireland before they go.

Earlier this year, freelance sound engineer Ellen O'Brien was looking for a holiday which offered something different.

"At the time, I was single, and a lot of my friends were in relationships, and no one was available to go with me," she says.

"I was looking for something that wasn't the typical resort holiday where you're surrounded by couples and families."

She was no couch-potato, says Ellen — but at the same time, she wasn't particularly fit.

However, when she looked at the itinerary offered by The Fitness Travel Company, a London-based firm founded by Laois native Rob Tynan, she was intrigued.

A four-week fitness programme, incorporating everything from squats and press-ups to weightlifting, jogging and biking, followed by a week in remotest Mexico doing everything from beach circuits to cross-country running?

"This was not something I'd ever considered before," admits the Lucan, Co Dublin woman.

"I wanted to tone up and get fitter but I was a bit apprehensive about whether I'd be able to do this!"

Although based in the UK, The Fitness Travel Company has strong links with Dublin — Ellen began her month's training with Shane Collins, Irish director of the company, at his Bodyrok gym in Ballsbridge.

On top of the twice-weekly sessions with Shane, Ellen also did an extra session every week by herself outside the gym, and it soon began to pay off. She had become noticeably fitter by the time she jetted off for her week in Marina Vallarta in Mexico last March.

"We did everything from yoga and beach circuit training, including squats and press-ups, to swimming, cross-country running and mountain biking.

"We'd jog to a waterfall and then swim in it, which was an amazing experience," she said.

"You're eating new food and seeing so much that you don't feel that you're on the go. You're having a whole different life experience."

The trip also helped Ellen find romance.

"I met my boyfriend (Alan) on the trip."

Alan, a banker, had also come to Mexico on his own — and love blossomed within days.

On her return to Dublin, Ellen had one week of fitness training left before the programme ended — but by this stage, the 32-year-old didn't want to stop exercising.

Several months later, she's still working out with Shane twice a week and goes biking at weekends.

"After the week, I felt so well. Loads of people said I looked amazing," she

Take a holiday on the wild side



Ditching Spanish sun and sangria for a week of full-on activity in exotic locations could change your life, writes **Áilín Quinlan**

says. "My fitness levels have gone through the roof."

The entire programme costs about €4,000 which, she admits, was "steep" — but for Ellen it was well worth it.

"A week at a beach resort in Spain would have been much cheaper, but this was life-changing, and you can't put a price on that.

"I now have a new body and two new men in my life — my boyfriend Alan and my trainer Shane. I made some great friends over there as well — once you have an experience like that nothing can top it!"

For Rob, it's all about offering clients a new experience. "I had a vision to create an authentic experience with each trip. People don't just sit on a beach and drink cocktails — it's a mind, body and soul experience," he says.

Rob has recently returned from Senegal in Africa, where he spent a week researching a new package against the backdrop of mangrove beaches and jungle.



He rose at 6.30am, jogged, tossed logs, crawled and climbed through the mangroves and finished off with a swim. And that was before breakfast.

Afterwards there was a three-hour kayaking trip or activities such as snorkelling, diving for clams or wild boar runs through the jungle.

Another of the company's programmes, the Masai Wild Warrior Fitness programme in Kenya, sends clients off on a range of unusual activities — from tree climbing, club throwing and dead tree lifting with Masai warrior guides, to soccer, game walks and archery.

Guests eat a 'palaeolithic' diet, including seeds, berries, fish and eggs, and accompany the warriors on sprints.

Then there's the Australian Outback Adventure, which offers a 12-day 'bucket list' of experiences from mountain-climbing to sky diving, mountain biking and beach adventure.



Shane Collins of Bodyrok Fitness training Ellen O'Brien preparing in Dublin; other photos show some options on The Fitness Travel Company holidays schedule. EL KEEGAN

Lunges, not loungers

Shortly before Christmas, marketing executive David Kilroy will fly to Senegal with his wife Emma for a week's holiday.

But they won't be topping up their tans on a lounger — their African holiday features wild boar runs, yoga, intensive drum-dancing, kayaking and jungle bush circuits.

The couple will be staying in a bush village, enjoying dune climbs and going hydro biking — and enjoy it they will, because by the time they leave Ireland, they will each have spent several weeks with trainer Shane Collins in the Ballsbridge Bodyrok gym.

David's looking forward to the Senegal programme — while Emma is very fit, he says he's only about average, and to begin with, he wasn't particularly interested in the concept.

But that all started to change after he visited the gym for a few trial sessions.

"Initially I wasn't hugely interested but I went along to a couple of sessions with Shane and it opened my eyes a bit about the importance of fitness and healthy living.

"After a few classes, I realised my fitness was not up to scratch.

"I need to have a good healthy mind and body, and I started to see the programme as a bit of a wake-up call."

In his late 30s, David, who employs a staff of eight, has a frenetic lifestyle, which routinely involves 12-hour days.

"I deal with clients all over the world who live in different time zones, so I am regularly on call 24/7," he explains.

For him, this is not about simply going on a holiday which will cost in the region of €6,000 for himself and Emma.

"I'm hoping to completely change my outlook and my attitude to my lifestyle.

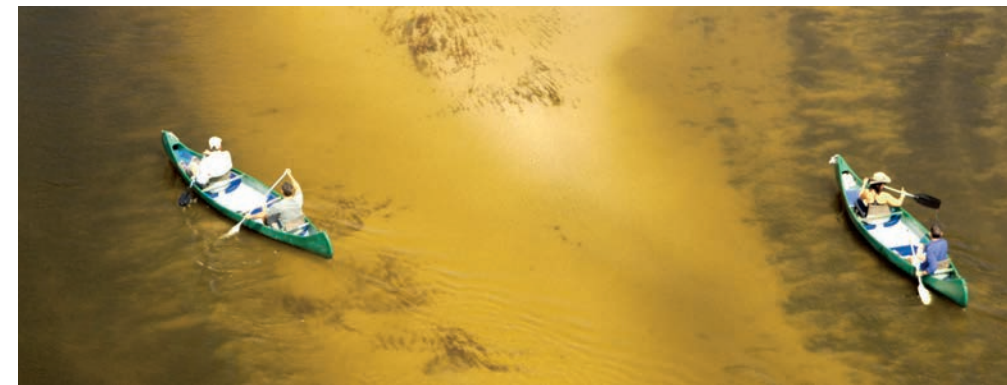
"This is not about a one-week holiday; it's a programme for changing my whole lifestyle — otherwise I wouldn't be interested in spending money and time on it.

"For me this is actually an investment in a new life — otherwise I wouldn't spend €6,000 on just a holiday.

"When I come back from Senegal, I have one week of fitness training left but I think I'll definitely be doing more than that!

"Emma is the fit one in the family, so for her, this is an extension of what she's already doing, but for me, this will hopefully be the beginning of a fitter, healthier life.

"It's a very holistic approach — you could go to a gym and get fit but this is a far more profound change than that."



Activities include leaping off a clifftop at Cape Byron in a tandem hang-gliding experience with a former Australian champion, outdoor bush circuits — complete with inquisitive kangaroos — and parachuting over the Whitsunday Islands. And then there's Thailand, where guests enjoy everything from jungle climbs to white-water rafting.

"It's the kind of holiday you have to prepare for," says Rob.

Client backgrounds vary, he says, but many are cash-rich, time-poor professionals.

"A lot of our clients would be in their mid-40s; people who have high-end jobs who may be very unfit. They feel different when they come back," he says.

"We find that a lot of people continue to attend sessions with their trainer because they've achieved such phenomenal results."

Prices — excluding flights — range from about €4,000 to just over €19,000.

"You're constantly active, though, not

working out. This isn't boot camp. This is more about integrating into the environment and being active," says Shane.

We're not trying to create gym bunnies," he says, adding, however, that the training programme is no cake-walk.

"It's a shock to the system for people sometimes. They may not have been to the gym or have done much exercise."

Clients are generally people who want to change something in their lives.

"You'll get people who have just come out of a long-term relationship and want to meet people, or you will have people who, for example, want to lose weight.

"This is not a one-week holiday; it's a four-to-six week programme which can help you kick start your life onto a new path."

www.fitnesstravelcompany.com