

THE EXPERTS... HEALTH

THE FOCUS

AFRICAN SPAS

Nowhere brings you back to yourself quite like Africa; a land of wide-open horizons, crazy-beautiful light, the elements, the animals, the earth. Africa is a meditation in itself. But what if you want to soak up the thrill of a melting beach sunset or see a lion cub asleep in the cradle of its mother's body, while also immersing yourself in a turbo-charged health blast? A small clutch of African retreats provides resolutions for the chronically tired, overweight and stressed. They are the perfect add-ons to a larger trip, while also being stellar enough to warrant the journey in themselves. By Daisy Finer

EASILY ACCESSIBLE as a beach finale after a dusty safari, the **Lion In The Sun** retreat in Kenya is a surprising detox fix from Henri Chenot, better known for his Italian mountain outpost Palace Merano. Located in Malindi, a hippy coastal town, this, however, is a significantly less institutional set-up. Instead of marble interiors, chandeliers and diamonds at dinner, there's a gloriously boho vibe. My bedroom, one of 16, provided simple comfort with a huge four-poster and a bathroom bigger than most London flats. There's a lovely swimming pool and a small gym, and the bio-light diet, known as 'the cure', is far less strict than its European counterpart. Despite the rules – no wheat, no sugar, no coffee, no alcohol, no butter – the food is exquisite.

It's fruit for breakfast to kickstart your digestion, but lunch and supper are both three-course meals, starting with

mini melon balls and mint, or pears in cinnamon sauce. The theory is that fruit should be eaten at the beginning of a meal rather than at the end, otherwise it ferments on top of the previous course. Next, good carbs – pumpkin gnocchi, bulgar wheat with vegetables, followed by inventive proteins: crab salad, calamari on a bed of garden peas. By the end of my week's stay I was so full that I was leaving food on my plate, and yet I had also lost half a stone. But the diet is just part of the appeal. The spa is sparkling and must have been a vast expense to the hotel's owner, Flavio Briatore. Naomi Campbell and Bono have both stayed here, which gives you some idea as to the standard.

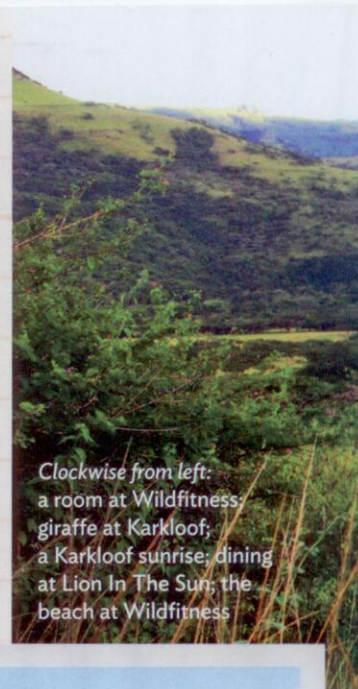
After an initial consultation with Spanish spa manager Marga, whose hands-on healing transforms weepy, headachy wrecks into slim, serene optimists, you are likely to be prescribed daily facials and massages. These are performed using an ancient Chinese cupping method that helps to draw out toxins, as well as hydrotherapy, which involves lying in a pummelling bath for 20 minutes before being slathered in foul-smelling algae, wrapped in blankets and then left to snooze in the dark. I fell asleep every time, only to be woken, stripped completely naked and hosed down until I was baby-soft and

squeaky clean. It's definitely not for the modest, but you are given the same therapist throughout your stay, which helps you feel more at ease.

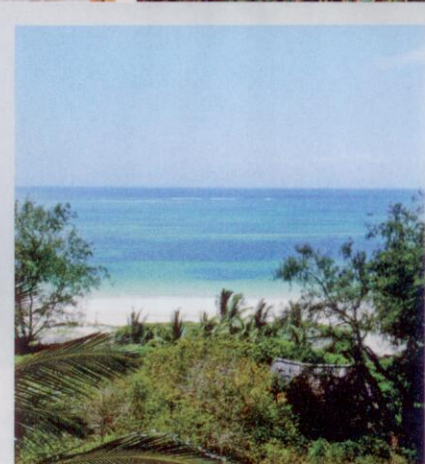
Days drift by in a whirl of stints in the gym, yoga and pool wallowings. Marga took me on a boat trip – blue light

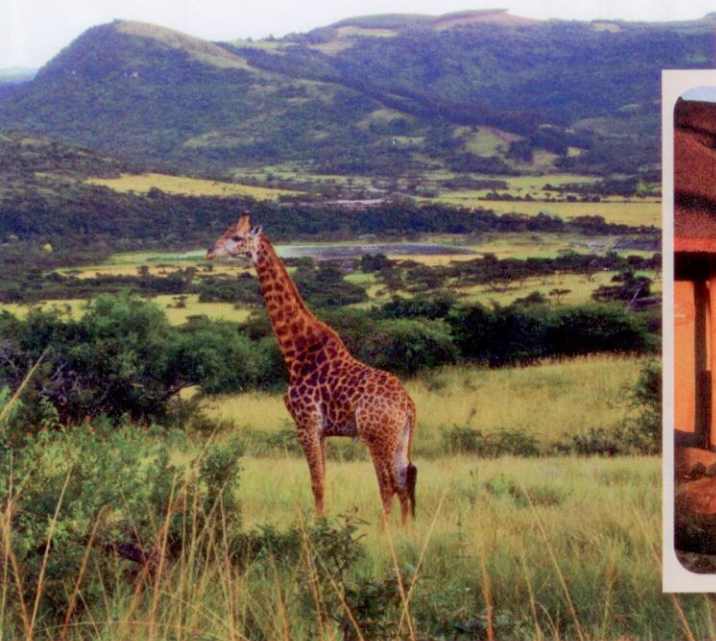
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bouncing off a pancake-flat sea – and we meditated in the ocean, an orange starfish tickling my toes. I looked better, felt calmer and light inside, with that delicious, taut, gathering-inward sensation. One night I slept for eleven hours, something I'd forgotten was even possible. It is no exaggeration to say that the whole experience left me feeling about 10 years younger. Lion In The Sun is one of my favourite spas in the world, and yet few people have heard of it.



Clockwise from left: a room at Wildfitness; giraffe at Karkloof; a Karkloof sunrise; dining at Lion In The Sun; the beach at Wildfitness





FURTHER DOWN THE COAST at Watamu, **Wildfitness** is one of the toughest, most intense and inspirational fitness holidays out there. You don't come here for a break. The heat alone is an ordeal; you'll want to drink your own body weight in water, and with no air-conditioning it's easy to worry on arrival how you will cope. Especially when told what's in store: leaping across obstacle courses at dawn, going for jungle runs, swimming for miles, boxing to the brink. This is exercise at its most elemental, beneath a scorching sun: sprinting barefoot on the beach, fighting, lifting, climbing, hanging, crawling. It's heart-burning and sweat-drenching. The godsend is that every kick-ass activity is followed by long periods of downtime with views of the Indian Ocean. And the results are astounding. You leave fully, resolutely charged. The point is an unfettered philosophy that is refreshingly simple and staggeringly effective: move your body hard, fast and for short periods of time. And eat the diet of the ancients. By the end of the week you will view

and everything from reflexology and Kneipp pools to t'ai chi. There are detox and weight-loss programmes, and the price of the stay includes up to 11 spa treatments a day. What really makes this place special, though, is its mesmerising setting in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. The countryside is stunning, with craggy cliffs in the distance, the glittering waters of the Albert Falls Dam and the 105-metre-high Karkloof Falls.

It's the most soothing and soulful landscape for a spa, which seamlessly combines holistic therapies with all the fun of game viewing. Everybody has their own ranger and Jeep, and there are no strict schedules, so this truly is bespoke safari. There are hundreds of species of birds and plants and you might spot white rhino, kudu, giraffe, zebra, hippos, warthogs and buffalo. Go for daily nature walks, take a mountain bike, trek, fish, swim, then flop out in the spa with its flotation and mineral baths, Moroccan rhassoul chamber and 17 huge treatment rooms. The food is organic, nothing is

prepackaged food back in the 'zoo' of city life as pretty despicable and will be completing tasks – a five-kilometre swim across a creek, for instance – that you previously thought impossible.

BEYOND KENYA, other treats await, particularly in South Africa. When it opened in 2009, **Karkloof** – an hour from Durban – was the country's first proper destination spa, with calorie-counted food, handpicked Thai therapists

imported or unseasonal, and the raw-food menu is one of the best I've come across: beautiful salads, soups, lasagnes and sorbets, even banana pancakes at breakfast. Karkloof set the standard for the spa-fari world, and no other spot

Karkloof seamlessly combines holistic therapies with the fun of game viewing

has matched it. Another crucial point: when you pass through Johannesburg, as you almost inevitably will, do make a detour to the astonishing **Saxon Hotel**. The spa here is truly forward-thinking, with treatments well worth the stopover.

A trip to Africa is always a tonic for the spirit. But when it comes to spas, it can also be a life enhancer. And it's deeply reassuring to know that you don't have to drag yourself off to a cold, clinical boot camp to achieve transformation. You can instead hotfoot it to the cradle of mankind – which makes so much more sense. **T**

The Explorations Company (+44 1367 850 566; www.explorationscompany.com) offers seven nights at **Lion In The Sun** from £3,090, half board, including flights and transfers. **Healing Holidays** (+44 20 7843 3597; www.healingholidays.co.uk) offers a nine-day Kickstart programme at Wildfitness from £3,350, full board, including flights, transfers, training sessions and activities. **Africa Travel** (+44 20 7843 3500; www.africatravel.com) offers four nights at Karkloof from £2,995, full board, including flights, transfers, activities and unlimited spa treatments. **Saxon Hotel, Villas and Spa** (+27 11 292 6000; www.saxon.co.za)