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"There was a time when I had been up for anything, where had that fearless woman gone?"

A Running Vacation Rebooted My Spirit

When she hit a wall in life, one woman challenged herself—and got both body and mind payoffs.

By GINNY GRAVES

“THESE RUNS JUST AREN’T doing it for me anymore,” I griped to my husband after finishing my usual four-mile trail. For months, I hadn’t felt the exhilaration I once did. Worse, my weight had begun to creep up, along with anxiety and insomnia.

“Maybe you should start cycling again,” Gordon said.

“But I like to run,” I responded. “It’s my thing, like triathlons are yours.”

“Then sign up for a half marathon,” he suggested, “to push your mileage.”

“Ugh.” I’d given up competition years before, when I realized it sucked

the joy out of running. Still, I felt an uncomfortable pang at my resistance to trying a new activity. There was a time when I had been up for anything: backpacking through the Austrian Alps, canoeing in the remote Canadian wilderness. Where had that fearless woman gone?

A few days later, Gordon came home with a grin on his face and announced, “I have just the thing to get you out of your exercise rut—a four-day running vacation in Spain!” Excited, I visited the website of the tour company, Running and Trekking Costa Brava,

and stopped cold. Each day would include 11 to 15 miles of running, with hundreds of feet of climbing and steep descents. I’d never even finished more than eight miles at once. I could feel a knee-jerk *no* forming in my mind, along with

the reasons: too difficult, too scary. “Sign us up,” I blurted, before I could talk myself out of it.

I trained for 12 weeks, pushing my mileage with each outing. By the time we arrived in Girona, Spain, and met up with the tour group—five avid runners, most of whom were younger than me by at least a decade—my legs were significantly stronger,

SO YOU WANT TO TRY A RUNNING GETAWAY?

► First decide on the type of trip you want. Some companies (like ActiveAtAltitude.com) host camps that improve speed, endurance and technique; others (like sister site Running-Vacations.com) book packages around preferred destinations or races. Ask if the price includes extras like video analysis and injury-prevention workshops. Good for beginners: Jeff Galloway’s Running Retreats in Florida and California. For aspiring ultramarathoners: The Cool Impossible camp in Jackson Hole, Wyo. —Amanda MacMillan

and there was less squishy flesh around my waist. My mind, however, was in worry overdrive: *What if my slower pace drags the group down? What if I embarrass myself? What if I fail?*

The first morning, we set off on a narrow single track that traversed upward through a forest of cork trees. Within minutes, Gordon and I fell behind, and it wasn't his fault. Distracted by distress over feeling slow, old and unfit, I tripped on a tree root and fell hard, scraping flesh off my left elbow and bloodying my knee.

Dabbing at the wounds, I felt tears of self-doubt and discouragement pooling. Back home, I had created a life structured around things I was good at: writing, raising our sons, being part of our community. For the first time in a long while, I was out of my comfort zone. My ego felt as raw and exposed as my oozing elbow.

I pushed on, though, and we arrived at a breathtaking promontory, the gem-bright sea in front of us. "Can you believe we're here?" asked a crazy-fit woman, throwing her arms around me. I

couldn't. Relief flooded through me. *No one cares if I'm slow! Look where I am!*

For too long, I had carefully avoided activities that challenged my competence, from a hip-

hop class to a speaking engagement. I'd thought my fitness routine was in a rut. In reality, it was my mind-set that was stuck.

Over the next three days, we covered miles of difficult terrain; I went at a comfortable pace at the rear of the pack. The running never felt easy, but it never felt impossible, either—and that made me proud.

Standing atop a 2,200-foot mountain on the last day, I gazed down at the miles of trail we'd climbed. I felt strong, confident—almost invincible. I pulled out my phone to take a photo and saw a text from a bookstore owner back home, inviting me to read an essay at an event. Public speaking is my biggest fear, period. Ordinarily, I'd say no as fast as my fingers could type. Instead I replied, "Sure, happy to do it." And I meant it. ■

The Health Travel Hot List

Cool trends making a splash this summer.

GROWN-UP CAMP

► Relive childhood at weekend retreats like (1) Camp No Counselors, complete with archery and s'mores.

TREETOP FITNESS

► The Aerial Adventure Course in Jackson Hole, Wyo., and (2) forest adventure park Ramblewild in Massachusetts feature rope bridges and giant swings hanging off branches.

GIRLS' HIKE OUT

► Inspired by the best-seller-turned-movie

Wild, outfitters like RED Adventures offer female-only backpacking trips on California's Pacific Crest Trail. Travel group Leave the Boys Behind runs women's hut-to-hut treks in Colorado mountain country.

FIND DINING

► The new joy of the catch: Restaurants will cook up your fishing haul, as at Florida's Hyatt Regency Sarasota.

PEDAL-POWERED HAPPY HOUR

► Earn a drink via bike outings at hip hotels

around the country. The Bikes and Beer ride at Aspen's Linsight Hotel ends a guided trip with local brews. At Kimpton's Hotel Palomar in Philadelphia, visitors can (3) jump on free cruisers, log miles on an app and redeem them for a glass of wine.

KAYAKING REDUX

► Rent a Bellyak at California's Klamath River Resort, a raft ridden facedown. Or try rodeo kayaking at Kiawah Island Golf Resort in South Carolina and surf stop the waves. —A.M.



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