

Walk TO FITNESS

Journalist **Louise Atkinson** sets off for a Nordic walking holiday and discovers it can burn more calories per hour than dancing, jogging or cycling!

As we scramble off the beach and turn to face a short steep hill up to the café I hear our instructor's voice from the back of the pack: 'Hang on to that lottery ticket! Squeeze those lemons!' We'd been romping along a coastal path, enjoying the Italian sunshine but this incline presents our first real challenge. We are not just walking, we are Nordic walking, which means using poles. The old me would be leaning forward, groaning, sweating and probably cursing, and taking short steps on the balls of my feet – calves screaming. But the Nordic

walking me is taking big 'heel-then-toe' strides, squeezing an imaginary lemon under my big toe to activate the power of my glutes, and gripping tightly to a fictitious lottery ticket I have been told to clench between my buttocks!

With each stride I extend my straight arm out in front of me as if to shake hands – muttering 'How do you do?' under my breath just to make sure I get the correct amount of forward stretch – loosely gripping the pole with my little finger and ring finger and planting it behind me to propel myself forwards. With so many



Using Nordic poles for walking reduces stress on joints by 30 per cent

instructions swimming about in my brain, I am surprised when I arrive at the top in record time, barely puffed. As I look over my shoulder at the steep slope behind me, non-plussed, it feels as though someone has been gently pushing me from behind.

I'm in Southern Italy as a guest of a British company called Flavours, holidaying with a group of women all keen to perfect our Nordic walking technique. And I have to confess, I thought Nordic walking was an oldie's thing – a bit like using walking sticks to stop you wobbling. However, it turns out this is a sport originally developed in the 1930s by cross-country skiers to mimic the action and maintain their fitness during times of no snow, and it is most definitely growing



Flavours' food is based on local ingredients



Atkinson indulges in some impromptu fun in the sun

in popularity. The great news is swinging those poles confers health benefits that far exceed the gentle rise in heart rate you get from going for an ordinary stroll. That's because those poles both propel you *and* support you.

For instance, when you are striding out with poles flying, the muscles of your arms, chest, abdomen and core come into play, meaning you are engaging almost twice as many muscles – 90 per cent of your body compared to 40 per cent – as with pole-free, ordinary walking. The correct action also helps improve your posture by encouraging you to walk with your shoulders back and your head held high.

But the poles offer support, too, reducing stress on your



Wisteria edges the beautiful al fresco Pilates studio

joints by up to 30 per cent. Apparently, a good Nordic walk will burn 20-40 per cent more calories than a stroll without you actually having to go any further or faster. And at a high intensity, it can burn more calories per hour than dancing, jogging or even cycling, helping you burn fat and strengthen your cardiovascular system.

LA DOLCE VITA

Our base for the week is Casino Pisanelli, an old 17th-century hunting lodge in the heart of rural Salento, with delightful rooms in the stables that surround the carefully manicured walled garden.

Each morning we gather in the beautiful wisteria-draped garden for a gentle session of Pilates by the pool before breakfast, and then head off to explore one of the historic towns and cities (Tricasse, Speccia and Lecce, known as 'the Florence of the South'), or a stretch of rugged coastline (Santa Maria di Leuca). On most days there's a bit of Nordic walking thrown in.

As we walk, Valentina, our host, tells us about local history and customs, plucking at wild plants and herbs for us to rub between our fingers and sniff. Who knew that a shrub that looks just like cow parsley could be a form of wild carrot? That the wild dill that grows in the hedgerows makes an excellent aniseed-scented limoncello?



Meals are prepared in the traditional way



Post-excursion, Atkinson heads back to the beautiful 17th-century hunting lodge



Guests strengthen their legs for walking with Pilates by the pool



Atkinson gets some one-to-one tips from the Pilates instructor

'I dig those poles deeper and there it is – a turbo charge that propels me forwards as if I had new batteries'

Some days we are treated to lunch at a café or dinner at a local trattoria (most of us opting for seafood or the specialty, ear-shaped orecchiette pasta) but most of our meals are prepared for us at the villa by professional chef Giulia, who is passionate about creating dishes typical of the region, using local ingredients. My favourites are the steamed leaves from poppy plants tossed in oil with tiny black olives from Giulia's garden, her beetroot carpaccio, and an unctuous, buttery asparagus risotto which, true to the traditions of the region, must be flipped and not stirred.

I love the way we are encouraged to embrace the Italian-ness of life in Puglia. When visiting a town, we simply *must* find a sunny spot to enjoy

gelato – much more exotic than nipping out for an ice cream! And each evening is marked by a 7pm gathering for 'aperitivos' i.e. a chilled glass of prosecco and local taralli nibbles as well as sweet and fruity Primitivo wine served with supper.

AND RELAX...

At other retreat-style holidays I've lurched from one activity to another, but the Flavours way is more relaxed. In the afternoons, we are left to our own devices to read, snooze or sunbathe by the pool; small groups pull out sketch pads and water colours using skills learned on previous Flavours holidays to capture the beauty of the villa, its gardens and the Puglian countryside.

We are a mix of ages and fitness levels – I notice the fittest in the group slip out in the



The buttery asparagus risotto was delicious!

afternoons for an extra trek through the olive groves that surround the villa. And, although the Flavours cooking courses often attract couples, this week we are all solo women (Flavours has no singles supplement). On the final day, I join them for a pole-swinging romp to the nearby village of Speccia, to burn off a few pasta calories and to consolidate my new Nordic walking technique.

Clutching that lottery ticket, the lemons, tummy in, shoulders back, reaching to shake hands with imaginary strangers at every stride, I have to pull out all the stops in a bid to keep up, but for the last mile, I dig those poles a little deeper and there it is – a turbo charge switch that propels me forwards as if someone has just installed new batteries. It's a revelation!

After just one week of walking, drinking and chatting, I feel deeply relaxed but fitter, stronger and enriched by my new-found knowledge of Southern Italy – and I am most definitely putting Nordic walking poles on my birthday wish-list. 🍷

TRIP NOTES Flavours Holidays offer Nordic Walking and Pilates tours to Italy and Spain throughout the year, as well as cooking, painting and language-learning breaks. The Nordic Walking and Pilates trips start from £1,899pp for an all-inclusive hosted week including destination transfers. Flights not included. Visit flavoursholidays.co.uk