

Behold the ‘Slim Reaper’

JAINE BLACKMAN takes a severely regimented slimming retreat in Devon – but will the starvation pay off?

A stay at Merlin Court, the new Slimmeria in Ilfracombe, is not for the faint-hearted... or the easily tempted. Forget indulgent spas and lying around in fluffy robes, this retreat is aimed firmly at people who are serious about dropping some pounds as swiftly as possible. And while no-one says that’s going to be easy, if you can last the course the rewards can be astounding, with weight losses of seven to 14 pounds a week.

After all, as indomitable owner Galia Grainger – aka The Slim Reaper – says: “What doesn’t kill you makes you thinner!”

Former Towie reality TV show star and self-confessed diva Gemma Collins lasted 10 hours under the regime at Galia’s sister establishment, the original Slimmeria in East Sussex.

On the other hand, former Emmerdale actress Rachel Riley who stuck with the programme reportedly lost eight stone, dropping from a dress size 30 to size 16, after kick-starting her fitness goals there.

I was visiting the newly-opened second Slimmeria in Devon with some trepidation. I’d watched some snippets of Channel 4’s The Extreme Diet Hotel – which were both hilarious (guests crying about too little food and too much exercise) and horrifying (that will be me!).

In the television show, Galia came over as a super-strict diet dominatrix - so it was a relief to meet her in person and discover that not only was she inspirational but she also had a wicked sense of humour.

“I charge people to starve them,” she said with a chuckle, during one of our daily two hour walks which she led.

That’s not entirely true but calories are limited to a vegan diet of about 500-600 a day, there’s no caffeine or alcohol allowed and you are expected to eat everything you



A meal at the Slimmeria



Galia Grainger outside her other Slimmeria –in Sussex – with her distinctive number plate. Picture: DanGoldsmith Photography

are served up.

It’s not a regime to follow on a long-term basis but, combined with a programme of exercise, the short, sharp shock leads to rapid weight loss.

After weighing in at the boutique hotel, lovingly restored by Galia in distinctive style, on Sunday evening we were up at 8am on Monday for a hot water with lemon before setting out on a walk through Ilfracombe to see Damien Hirst’s influence on the town – which includes Verity, a 20-metre statue of a bisected pregnant woman in the harbour.

Ignoring the aroma of bacon rolls as we passed by the cafes of the seaside town, we carried on our walk, stopping briefly to chat with “the rat man”, a local eccentric who has 18 wild rats he feeds.

Ilfracombe is surrounded by hills which made our hikes challenging but rewarded us with spectacular views.

Back at the Slimmeria, breakfast was a carrot and ginger juice.

Then it was on to a fitness class with former Green Beret Sam Courton, who tailored exercises for our group of five according to our abilities and ensured that, despite all the extra activity, I suffered no aches and pains.

Time for lunch? No, there was still an hour’s yoga session before tucking in to our raw vegetables.

That afternoon we all had a



Merlin Court - the base for the Devon Slimmeria

massage and some free time when we were encouraged to do another walk.

“Don’t go to sleep,” Galia told us sternly but sensibly. In her experience, it’s those who nap in the afternoons who then lay awake at night and “moan they are hungry and their mattress is uncomfortable”.

Dinner of steamed vegetables and brown rice (which tasted much nicer than it sounds) was at 6.30pm, followed by a fun burlesque session with Karen Moss, a one time Oxford resident and John Radcliffe nurse.

Tuesday to Friday followed a similar pattern with a long walk,



Fitness instructor Sam Courton puts a guest through his paces

fitness class, yoga or pilates, and an evening class. I woke up on the Wednesday feeling a bit woozy. Galia had just the solution: I was presented with a “magic raisin” - a single raisin presented in a bowl.

On Saturday morning we had our final weigh-in when I was delighted to discover I had dropped from 11st 11lb to 11st. It seemed too good to be true so I weighed myself again when I got home... and my own scales put me at 10st 12lb.

Magic indeed!

ESSENTIALS

Go along: The Slimmeria season at Merlin Court, Ilfracombe, begins again in March 2020 with prices starting from £745. See slimmeria.com/ While in Ilfracombe: Do not miss Damien Hirst’s towering figure of a woman, Verity, which dominates the harbour. Also worth doing are the boat trips out to sea, passing picturesque Exmoor villages.