

THE  TIMES

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03.08.24

KEEPING UP WITH THE KLITSCHKOS

THE BOXING BROTHERS
ZELENSKY, TRUMP AND
OUR FIGHT FOR UKRAINE

By Jane Mulkerrins

PLUS

What really happens on stag nights
(it's worse than you think)

Giles Coren goes large in Ibiza

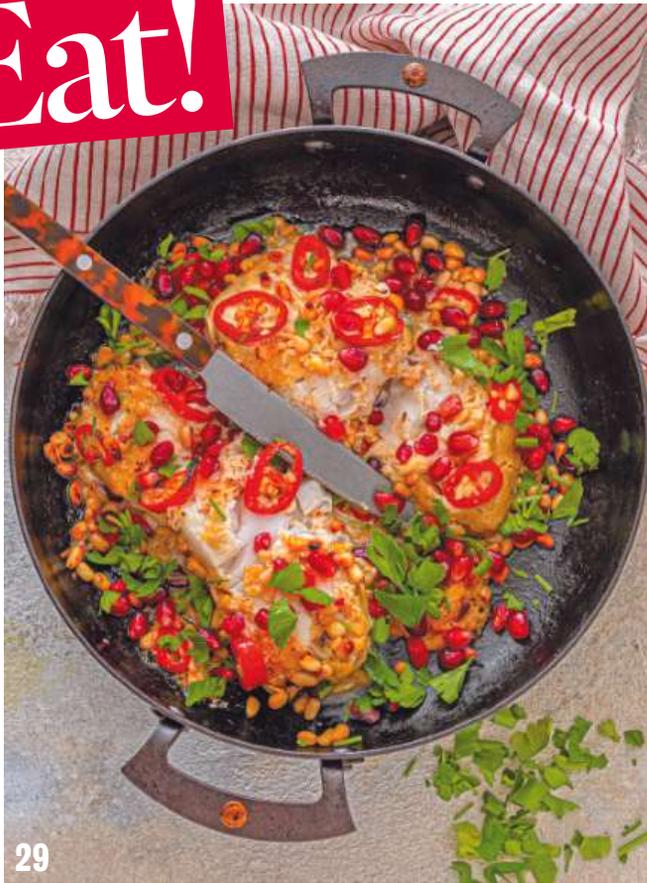


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CAITLIN MORAN

Are you a book or a Kindle holiday reader? I know which I am. Oh, wait...

Which is best, books or Kindles? If there were a war and you had to pick a side? Well, it's books, obviously:

a suitcase without books is the suitcase of a *barbarian*. If you don't have a book in there, I will presume this holiday is one of needful recuperation – after your exhaustive sacking of Rome. The indisputable things of holidays are: swimming costume, hat and 600 laser-cut pages between two hardback lids, £26.99. Plus a couple of lighter paperbacks for when your wrists get tired.

Books – big, inky books – are still one of the best things we've ever come up with. The minute we upgraded from the scroll, we invented *not only* the most compact way to transmit thoughts, feelings and jokes from one brain to another but *also* a small, portable room we can disappear into instantly if the real world becomes too disgusting. Open a book in front of your face and you have essentially popped yourself into a secret chamber with a notice on the door that reads, "Sorry, I am in Gormenghast/West Egg/a Brooklyn suburb in which a tense marital drama is about to unfold and so am unavailable for your bullshit."

The physical presence of books allows you to make important decisions, fast. As a teenage girl the best advice I was ever given was, "If you go back to a man's house and he has less than a hundred books, *do not sleep with him.*"

The first time I heeded this advice, things went unexpectedly badly, whereupon my friend clarified, with urgency, "DUDE – HAYNES MANUALS DO NOT COUNT."

And however full a book is with the author, there's still a lot of blank space left for others. In the margins, on the flyleaf. If you collect second-hand books, you also collect a lot of ghosts. On my shelf there's the person who wrote "YES!" next to Germaine Greer's "Women have very little idea of how much men hate them" and the person who started arguing with Delia Smith's recipe for quiche (a furious "needs FAR FEWER ONIONS").

My copy of *Little Women* has "To Cecily, from her godmother, Christmas 1912" in an elegant copperplate that's faded from black to old gold.



Slide it into your bag – or bra if the occasion is urgent – and your entire library is travelling with you

"A war is coming!" I wanted to tell Cecily. "You are in unsafe times!" I knew of her. She would never know of me. But we both knew Jo March and the war her father was in. We both opened the same book and spent our childhood in the same world, together. There isn't even a name for this relationship – unless it is simply "books".

Yes: books are the best. The *creak* when they open. The smell. Faded silk binds; slightly foxed; marginalia. Books win.

But then, oh! A Kindle! One slim black lozenge you slide into a pocket or bag – or if the occasion is urgent, a bra – and now your entire library is travelling with you. It demands the invention of a new word, "Kindlery": evoking the feeling of total satisfaction in knowing that whatever happens, you are safe because you have a whole bookshop with you.

The first time I travelled with a Kindle I ended up with a four-hour delay on my flight. The woman next to me wept, then took a Valium and passed out. I, on the other hand, was ebullient: I'd always wanted to read the complete works of Dickens in chronological order, but had suffered from all my previous flights leaving on time. I took an apple from my bag, downloaded *Sketches by Boz* and was happy as a clam.

And it's not just being a jukebox of *every book in the world* that makes a Kindle superior: it comes with its own furniture too. On a night flight? Sleepless in a tent? Locked in a box that's been thrown down a well? If you have a Kindle you're *fine*, because *Kindles have their own light*. You're now Mary Poppins, opening your carpet bag and bringing out both the new David Sedaris *and* a massive standard lamp. Lost your glasses? Kindle makes the words bigger. Never really known what "hegemonic" means? Kindle's thesaurus can tell you. So *obviously* Kindles are better than books. The war is won.

Unless... you read a lot. If you read a lot, you can see this final plot twist coming a mile away: *books were the mother of the Kindle all along*. There is no war: mothers want their daughters to be faster and smarter than them. But they're also proud that they're heavier than their daughters and marked by others. Slightly foxed but classic.

There's no war between books and Kindles. They are family. You just need a bigger suitcase. ■



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SPINAL COLUMN

MELANIE REID

I'm trapped in bed, waiting for my carer. Then she falls into the room, sobbing. 'The cows!'



When you're dependent upon another person to get you up, every morning is much like the last. You silence your alarm, check your drainage tubes aren't kinked and calculate which bits hurt the most from lying in one position all night. If you're not screaming sore you sneak five extra minutes until your getter-upper arrives.

Best not, I find, to remember the old joys of an early summer morning that belonged to you and you alone. When I would get up before anyone and wander round the field to check the horses. Another lifetime.

Just occasionally, though, in present realities, mornings get exciting. My main carer, Janice, possibly the most reliable person I've ever met, had taken a very rare holiday. The alarm had gone off at 6.50, and I was lying snoozing, waiting for my stand-in carer, who was due to arrive at 7 o'clock because she was squeezing me in before going to her main job.

I became aware time was getting on. She was running late. Very late. Your brain trills with concern. Your stomach tightens. Was she OK? Had something happened? Had she forgotten? If she couldn't make it, what exactly was I going to do? Who you gonna call – Ghostbusters?

Just then the door burst open and A – she's so embarrassed she's asked me not to name her – fell into the room. At first

I thought she was convulsed with laughter, then realised she was sobbing. She was shaking violently, gasping for air.

It's hard to make sense of anything, let alone offer a hug, when you're lying down unable to, well, act like a mother and create any semblance of reassurance. Eventually, she managed to get the words out. "The cows," she wailed. "The bloody cows! They surrounded my wee car. I tried to reverse and got stuck in a ditch. And there was this huge evil black one and it was foaming at the mouth and it wanted to kill me."

She was genuinely traumatised. I had known she was wary of cows, but had no idea of the extent of the fear. "I kept phoning but you didn't answer and I didn't know what to do and I thought they were going to tip the car over and I blew the horn but they ignored it there was smoke coming out from the bonnet..." and she started sobbing again, quite distraught.

Reading this, there will be two reactions. The minority, who know cows, will shake their heads and say, "What she should have done is..." and the majority who don't will say, "Oh, the poor soul. How utterly terrifying."

I had both reactions. I've been around cows most of my life. At Granny's, I played with the daughter of the next door dairy farmer. We used to drive the cows up the lane for milking, with their bony hips and massive swinging udders, never too fast, mind, and gentle with the old and lame ones. I'm fond of them, but I respect

them, like horses, as potentially dangerous. And I know you must drive assertively, sounding the horn, when they shelter from the rain on the track to our house.

"I blew my horn," wept A. "I've been blowing it for half an hour. I thought you'd hear it. But they wouldn't move. Eventually I managed to free the car and get past. I had to get here." My heart dissolved for her and her courage, a panicked woman doing a vital, undervalued job, in a tiny car, facing challenges way beyond her duty to face.

I gave her my landline (my mobile had been on silent) and bought her two personal attack alarms and an air horn. I advised her how to drive at the cows. The next day, the air horn made them run. But going home, I watched as they closed in on her car, refusing to budge from her revving engine or various horns and buzzers. I sent Dave and two builders down to rescue her – and sat, grinding my teeth in frustration, as they weren't able to shift them either. Everyone was too tentative. The cows were being grandly entertained by the strange spectacle. Eventually Dave's 200-yard whistle made them start to shift.

Dear A remains cheerful and wants to keep coming. I've added to her arsenal a ref's whistle and loudspeaker with a siren. "Stay in your car and curse at maximum volume," I tell her. ■

*@Mel_ReidTimes
Melanie Reid is tetraplegic after breaking her neck and back in a riding accident in April 2010*



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What I've learnt Jason Watkins

Actor Jason Watkins, 61, was born in Shropshire. He made his television debut on *EastEnders*, and is best known for his roles in *The Crown*, *W1A*, *Line of Duty* and *Nativity!*. In 2011, his two-year-old daughter Maude died of sepsis. He won a Bafta in 2015 for *The Lost Honour of Christopher Jefferies* and dedicated the award to her. He lives in London with his wife, fashion designer Clara Francis, and their two children. He also has two sons from his first marriage to actress Caroline Harding.

You feel the ache of loss physically. You can feel your heart breaking and this pain in your chest, which many bereaved parents talk about. With the passing of months and years, those really difficult things that make you think you can't go on and you won't ever get over it do lessen a lot. You become able to accommodate the loss of your loved one somewhere within you.

My dyslexia can be horrendous. When I was younger, script read-throughs were a real struggle. I'd feel really embarrassed because I couldn't put the words together. I got a bit overwhelmed by everything and occasionally still do.

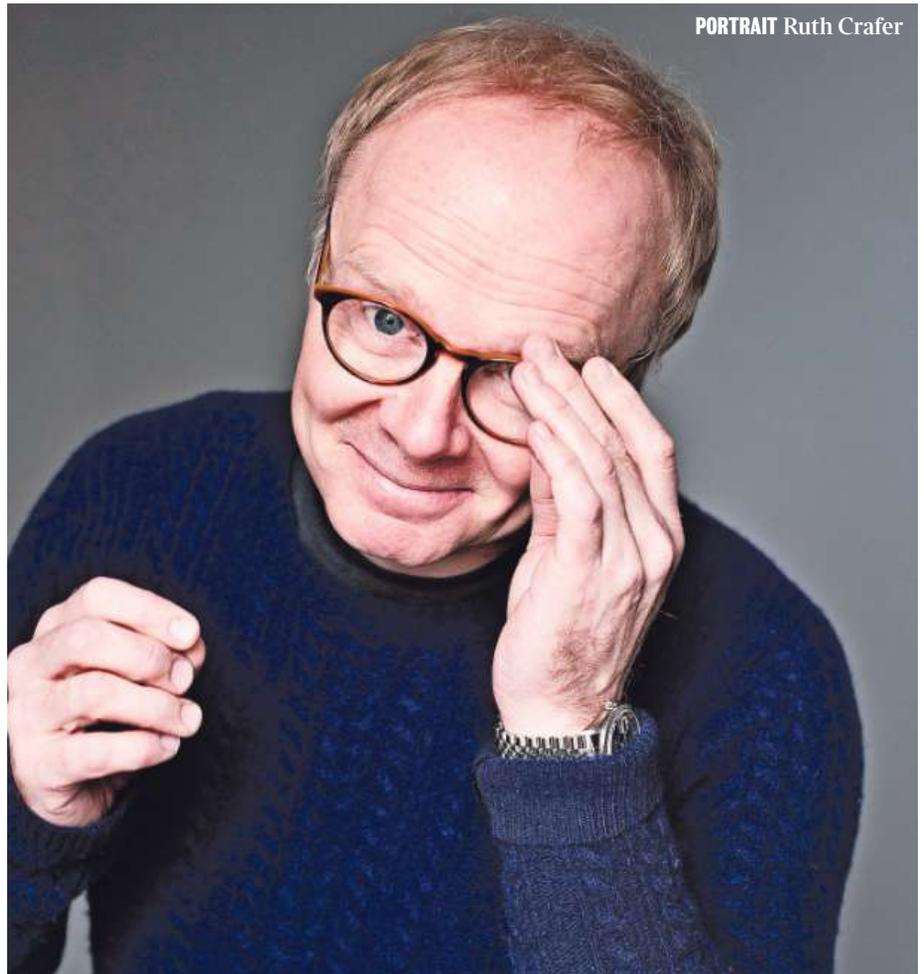
I was the victim of a scam. I lost a lot of money. Scammers are very sophisticated, but I still struggle with it. I feel like I'm an idiot and say to myself, "How the f*** did you manage to do that? You're so stupid." But it's like someone physically robbing you: you can't do anything about it. I've also been punched in the face for no reason at all by some guy when I was coming back from doing a show in the theatre, the night before press night.

My daughter died on New Year's Day, so that's always a really difficult time. People are celebrating, so it's tricky. We have a bench on Hampstead Heath, where she used to go. All our friends meet up and walk there each year.

I thought I was a bit stupid. My dad had achieved a lot – he was adopted and got to Cambridge – and my mother was a teacher. But I found it so difficult to concentrate at school. I couldn't read books; I only read two. I found I could express myself through acting and sport – I played for Wrexham youth football team.

I wouldn't be averse to giving politics a go, having played Harold Wilson. After we actors have played a character, we always think that we could do what they do, which we can't. I liked Wilson and his politics. I didn't know that he was as prolific with the ladies [Wilson had an affair with his deputy press secretary while in No 10]. I would have liked to have had a pipe or something of his, but I missed an auction of his belongings by a few days.

Me, my first and second wife are all friends. It's complicated. We're all close and fine now, but it was tricky for a while. Clara [his



PORTRAIT Ruth Crafer

'I was the victim of a scam. I lost a lot of money. I still feel like I was an idiot to fall for it'

INTERVIEW Georgina Roberts

second wife] and I have known each other for nearly 40 years.

I knew it would be harrowing filming the Aberfan episode of *The Crown*. [The 1966 Aberfan mining disaster killed 116 children.] As someone who has lost a child and suffered grief, what an opportunity it was to create an hour of television where other people might understand what that feels like. Doing the research on that awful tragedy was really difficult. There were times when I knew that I had to be less emotional filming it. For three or four lines, I found it really hard to even speak. I couldn't function properly.

When I said, "I want to be an actor," my mother said, "Oh my God, no." She became prouder of me as time went by. When I got into Rada, my dad said, "You've joined all

the beautiful people." He probably had a more glamorous view of it than it is. It is both glamorous and difficult. I lost him a couple of years ago. I don't think he fully understood what it was that I did, but he was pleased that I'd reached a level.

My wife and I each have a tattoo in memory of our daughter. We both woke up on the same day and said, "I've been thinking about a tattoo." Grief is such a physical thing that happens to you, so a tattoo is a way of applying a different physical thing to your body.

I got close to breaking the world record for walking on my hands. It's the length of a basketball court. I found myself doing it when I was about nine. It's a running gag on sets now – I walked on my hands in *The Crown*, *Nativity!* and *Would I Lie to You?* ■

Series four of *McDonald & Dodds*, starring Jason Watkins, is on ITV1 and ITVX



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THE CORENS GO LARGE IN IBIZA
'IF THIS IS HOW TO RECREATE THE
HOLIDAYS OF MY CHILDHOOD,
I'LL GRAB IT WITH BOTH HANDS'

Giles and Esther Coren at Casa Carpinteros in the northeast of Ibiza with their children Kitty and Sam, photographed by Dara Dorsman



Giles Coren wanted nothing more than a few lazy weeks roasting in the Mediterranean drinking rosé. His wife, Esther, said it would be far too boring for the kids and she hates the sun. How did they solve their family holiday dilemma?



I look back on blistered sunburnt shoulders in the 1970s with weepy nostalgia

“May? It’ll be freezing! Nothing will be open.”

“It’s generally about 25C,” she replies. “I’ve checked.”

“Twenty-five?” I reply. “Brrrr... That’s not even 80 in old money. I’ll need a coat. We’ll have to eat stews. We’ll want wetsuits for the pool.”

But I’ll take what I can get so I hit the phone, called a travel agent and told her what I needed: a villa with a big pool which probably means it’ll have to be an eight-sleeper even though we’re only four. It needs a view of the sea, but doesn’t want to be on the sea because that’ll be too noisy. It needs to be 20 minutes by car from at least six excellent beaches. And by excellent, I mean sandy. Pebbles I’ll get in Wales. And bloody Devon.

And when I say “car”, I mean Jeep. I will not drive anything with a roof on holiday. And four-seater convertibles are pimp cars. The kids will love a Jeep. Oh, and flights from Heathrow or London City. No Gatwick, no Luton, no Stansted. We are not philistines.

I need incredible local restaurants, so probably not France, where the restaurants are too far up themselves and serve food from the 1980s. Or Italy, where the waiters are all mean and the food is boring. Greece or Spain, basically. And not North Africa, obv. Not just now. World issues, you know.

“What about Ibiza?” said the agent.

“Ibiza! Yes! Yes to Ibiza! Love Ibiza. Used to go in the 1970s with my folks. Been there several times with the kids. Super food, lovely people, very chilled, can’t get lost because it’s an island... Wait, but not in the south. Nowhere near Ibiza Town. Nowhere near Ushuaia, where I went once for dinner ten years

Look at these photos. What a holiday. Feel the warm sun on our backs, our gasp as we hit the swimming pool’s cool blue water. The herby, citrus smells of the scrub, the salt of the just visible sea. Smell the suntan lotion, that sweet piña colada for the skin. Taste with relish the big glass of pale rosé with three lumps of ice in to keep it cold, melting gently into the wine to persuade you it’s just a soft drink, really, and the more of it you swallow, the better hydrated you will be. Feel the Fomo. Own the envy. Curse my name not just for being here, but for showing off about it, like the worst kind of Instabragger.

Yeah, well, save your curses. This is not where I am for my summer holidays. As you read this, I am in west Wales, as usual, and it’s bogging it down. Then I’ll go to Devon, as usual, where it will bog it down even more. Then we’ll come back to London (where it will not have stopped bogging all summer), and while Kitty goes to a Guides camp in Sheffield (yes, Sheffield, world capital of bogging it down), Sam and Esther and I will go to Germany.

Yes, Ger-flipping-many. Because, since you ask, Sam has been teaching himself German on Duolingo and wanted to go to the Fatherland to test his skills out IRL. And Esther said, yes, sure darling, we’ll go to Germany for our actual foreign summer holiday. Not France or Spain or Greece. Because nobody in this family gives a Scheisse where Vati wants to go. We’ll go to fricking Deutschland because our little prince has been teaching himself German.

And when I say “teaching himself German”, know this: Sam is on a 617-day “streak” on the app and he’s very into it and it’s all marvellous and we’re terribly proud, but when I say, “Guten Morgen,” to him, he scowls back and says, “Ugh, Dad, we haven’t done that yet.” So just exactly what he is going to say to all those krauts when we finally get to Bavaria is anyone’s guess.

Last year, after Wales and Devon (I’m sorry, but I don’t count any trip within the country of my birth as “holiday”), we went to... Canada. Yes, Canada. We flew, we spent the money, we had all the hassle of airports and transfers and foreign money and stupid hotel breakfasts, but did we, when we finally got there, have gorgeous all-day sunshine? Boat trips to secluded Mediterranean islands, backflipping off the cabin into the azure Aegean? Evening walks into the village through the rosemary-aromatic *maquis*, for a pastis and a look at the local girls massing for the town hall disco?

No, we had wetsuited bodyboarding in the frozen Pacific at Tofino, dawn bear-spotting trips up Knight Inlet,

endless whale-watching cruises, and a lot of stodgy waffles with bad bacon and undrinkable coffee at Tim Hortons. Why? Because my wife considers the Mediterranean in summer now to be “too hot” and because “just lying by a pool all day is boring”.

Sorry, but where I come from, that’s fighting talk. Worse, it’s sacrilege. Too hot? What does this mean? A soup can be too hot. A planet can be too hot. A car radiator, a curry, a child’s body temperature. But a holiday? Never. The hotter it gets, the more clothes you take off, the more rosé you drink, the more olive oil you smear all over your body to get that mahogany tan that was good enough for all the cool people in St Tropez in 1974, when I first formed my idea of what a holiday should be, and should be good enough for them now.

And when you get so hot that the sweat is pouring off your face onto the Wilbur Smith novel you found on the villa rental shelf, making it too swollen and wet to turn the pages, you lay it on the ground to dry for a bit and jump in the icy blue pool that is absolutely not boring, lol there for a bit until your body temp drops to normal levels, maybe snooze on the lilo for a few minutes, then get out and start the whole cycle again until it’s time for a pootle down to the coast for a fish lunch in a car so hot you leave the back of your legs on the driving seat when you get out.

But Esther cites global warming (yawn) and a general rise in southern Mediterranean temperatures that are no longer funny. As if 40-45C were in some way intolerable rather than merely balmy. She cites a sharp increase in tourist deaths as a result. She speaks of forest fires (which I personally think are great fun to watch being dealt with by those cool planes that scoop up water from the sea, along with schools of mackerel and the odd snorkeller, and drop it over the smoke). She mentions the tiger mosquito infestations that have followed the rising European heat.

She points out that it is she, not I, who is responsible for suntan-lotioning the kids (which I don’t consider necessary, personally – I actually look back on those bubbling blisters on my shoulders in the 1970s with a nostalgic tear in my eye). She reminds me that her Nordic red hair and freckles and Kitty’s genuinely sky-blue English skin mean that they literally cannot tan, even if they wanted to sit roasting under the sun all day (although Sam has inherited my magical Ashkenazi epidermis that goes the colour of a Regency dining table just from reading Condé Nast Traveller). And I reply, “So you’re saying I never get to go to the Mediterranean again?”

And she replies, “Sure you do. We can go at May half-term. It’ll be lovely then.”



ago and still have nightmares about. Got to be north of the middle. Don't mind mostly English people but they have to be posh English. No one who calls it "Eye-beefa". I don't go to Eye-beefa. Never been. Ib-eetha, yes. Eye-beefa, massive no. But at the same time, no traditional "finca" nonsense. Talking about a nice modern space, surrounded by pine trees, couple of kids' bedrooms in the basement, nice and cool, option of aircon but shouldn't need it. Big kitchen, eating area, sitting room and then upstairs a proper big double suite with nice views and a long way from the children so that at night, after a couple of drinks, when the kids are asleep, Mum and Dad can shut the door and do what mums and dads do at night on holiday. Which is argue.

And she found it. She bloody found it. Correct to every last one of those apparently impossible details. Casa Carpinteros. Ten minutes from lovely Santa Eulària des Riu and fifteen from Santa Gertrudis, with its shady squares, good restaurants and gentle, mellow evening scene.

It's 25 minutes from Benirràs beach, where we first went with the kids ten years ago, with its lovely bar and restaurant whose name I can't remember. But there are only two, and the other one is fine too. And barely ten from Cala Llonga, which is big and sandy and sheltered, built-up but only in a 1970s way, with beach tat shops, restaurants and a couple of bigish hotels but not megahotels. It's the site of a quite big restaurant with nautical stuff hanging about, fishing nets and the like, whose name I can never remember but is great for grown-ups and kids. As long as you don't order from the sushi menu and the main menu at the same time, as they come out of different kitchens and they never, ever manage to synchronise, however hard they try.

It's also 25 minutes from my favourite Ibiza restaurant, Chiringuito Cala Xucler, on a tiny little beach with nothing else there. At least I think that's its name. But it doesn't matter as it's impossible to get a table and they only take cash, which I never have. But it doesn't matter, because S'Illot des Rencli is literally three minutes away, on an even tinier beach, which is properly old-school with quite grumpy-looking old ibizencos toting wonderful whole fish and strong wine. But they cheer up eventually. The old men, not the fish. The fish are dead. And it's only 20 from Saint Joan de Labritja, which I love too.

What I'm saying is that this house was not more than 25 minutes from dozens of wonderful places. Which is always true in Ibiza, if you just get up into that northeastern quarter. The bit where, if the island were a clockface and it were three o'clock, you'd want to spend the summer (and the rest of your life, probably) above the hour hand and to the right of the minute hand.

The house was bliss. And just as described. Not new but recently refurbished to an immense spec. Wonderful furniture and art. Candles everywhere. Lovely cool tiles and soft, knobbly artisanal carpets. Full outdoor kitchen. All that stuff. Chairs and tables and loungers in nooks around the garden. A massive great mirror outside by the pool to do your morning yoga in front of.

Not kidding. I did yoga. Never had before. They offered an instructor to come to the house but that was a little *too* Ibiza for me, so I searched up a guy online who did yoga tutorials for men over 50 and when I woke every morning I went out to the deck and did half an hour of it on my own as the sun came up. Largely to have something to write in this piece. And I did feel kind of stretchy by the end of the week.

After the yoga I would dive in the pool, hitting the night-cooled water with a squeal. It's a good, deep pool, perfect for recidivist diving nuts like me. So I'd get out and do a few different dives. Because you can't do that in Wales or Devon. Or effing Germany. And then I'd swim a bit, looking out at the trees. After a few laps I'd make myself a coffee in the brilliant little machine for which they left heaps of (recyclable) capsules and make myself a plate of jamón ibérico de bellota (it's about a quarter the price it is in England), olive oil and bread and go and sit and read in the cool sun, watching the odd cat slinking through the shady scrub, hoping my family would never wake up.

Wait. Not in the sense that I hoped they'd all died in the night. That would be awful. Just that they would sleep long and hard because this was my time. My holiday. My pool. They've

got the summer, with the wetsuits and the umbrellas and the grim pies in dismal pubs. They think the Mediterranean is boring. So I want them asleep and silent while I enjoy it.

But eventually they did wake up. And, of course, they did love it. They got into the reading too, which for me is the point of a holiday. Sam went through a couple of volumes of the *Hunger Games* series and Stuart Broad's autobiography, *Broadly Speaking*. Kitty was on Kazuo Ishiguro. I tore through Percival Everett's wonderful *James*, a retelling of *Huckleberry Finn* from Jim the slave's point of view, and a new history of Captain Cook's last voyage (proper bloke books). And Esther scrolled a lot of Instagram Reels about home furnishing. Then we'd go to the beach for a bit, swim, eat, and drive back up into the hills in the Jeep, listening to Guns N' Roses and Bon Jovi on RockFM, the local golden oldies station. Nothing has ever made my kids laugh like that old Ibiza DJ introducing "Leebeen on a prayer" and "You geeb lub ay baid naim".

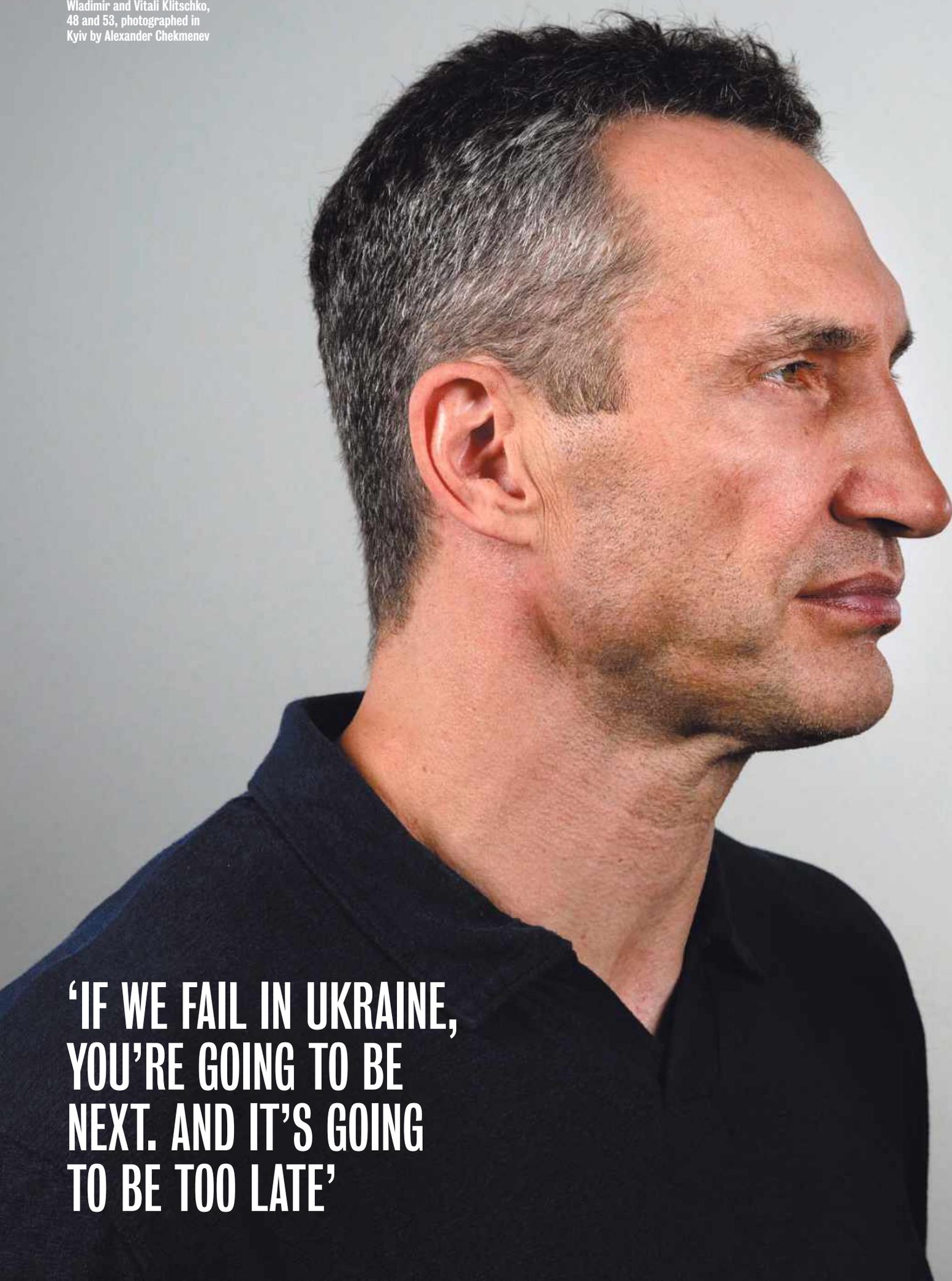
One evening a chef called Matteo came and cooked for us, which was gorgeous. A huge barbecue feast prepared on the outdoor grill. And our friends Immy and Kenton, who have a house here and pass for Ibiza royalty, came down and helped us out with a case of Miraval. Otherwise, we cooked simply – no meal is tastier than one I've made in swimming trunks – shared a bottle under the stars and turned in early.

And Esther was right, in the end. It was a lovely time to be there. Wherever we drove (I can still feel the smooth pedals under my bare feet, the throb of that tight clutch), it was through a carpet of spring flowers, pinks and whites and blues. The land was not yet scorched to a moonscape by three months of what used to be called "desert heat" before the great warming. A car left by the beach all day was perfectly comfortable to get into to go home. Nobody burnt and nor did the land. There was no traffic yet to speak of and the bars and restaurants had only just opened, so they were relaxed and looking forward to the season, not tired and bored and fed up with tourists. And good tables in the best restaurants were easy to come by.

It was the best of times, in the best of all possible seasons. I am sad that climate change and a fussy wife have made my favourite bit of Europe a no-go zone in summer. But if this is the shape of springs to come, I'll grab it with both hands. ■

Giles Coren travelled with Scott Williams. Casa Carpinteros is available from May-September. Sleeping up to eight in four bedrooms, it costs from €6,930 per week in May (01749 812721; scottwilliams.co.uk)

Wladimir and Vitali Klitschko,
48 and 53, photographed in
Kyiv by Alexander Chekmenev



**'IF WE FAIL IN UKRAINE,
YOU'RE GOING TO BE
NEXT. AND IT'S GOING
TO BE TOO LATE'**



The Klitschko brothers are the legendary boxing champions turned political heavyweights. Vitali is mayor of Kyiv; Wladimir is a special envoy for Ukraine. Now, two and a half years after Putin's invasion of their country, they're battling the biggest fight of their lives. Jane Mulkerrins meets them

It's a pavement-cracking mid-July day in Kyiv and, in front of the powder blue baroque of St Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery, in a square now serving as a museum of captured Russian military vehicles, we are conducting the fastest of photoshoots. Not merely because it is 37C, humid as a swamp, and even our photographer's camera is overheating ominously, but because our subjects, Vitali and Wladimir Klitschko, former world heavyweight boxing champions turned political heavyweights, quickly get mobbed wherever they go. And, with a combined height of almost 14ft, it's not easy to move around stealthily with Ukraine's most celebrated siblings.

Sure enough, within minutes, members of the public are sidling up between the rusty tanks for selfies. And, once we've got our shot, the Klitschkos cheerfully oblige. "Safest place in Kyiv," beams Vitali – who, for the past decade has served as mayor of the city – as a woman and her young daughter squeeze between the gargantuan brothers. It's difficult to imagine Sadiq Khan getting pestered for pictures in quite the same way.

Until January 2022, Wladimir was based mainly in the US and in Germany, where he had spent most of his boxing career and where both brothers enjoy huge fame and popularity, but, as the threat of an invasion loomed, he returned to Ukraine and is part of the Kyiv Territorial Defence Brigade.

But thanks to his sporting profile, he also serves as a special envoy for Ukraine, a secret diplomatic weapon dispatched to raise money and resources. In early March 2022, just two weeks into the war, the brothers had already raised €100 million (£84 million) of support for Ukraine via a fundraising campaign in Germany.

"Those of us who were living outside Ukraine came [back] to defend Ukraine, to defend the right of living under democracy not dictatorship," says Wladimir. "When your neighbours, your relatives, your friends are getting murdered, raped, and your country and your way of living, your infrastructure, is getting destroyed, it's just not right." And, he adds, "If we fail, you're going to be next. I know it's not pleasant. I know it's heavy; I know it's expensive. But it's going to knock on your door and it's going to be too late."

A couple of mornings earlier, I had bumped into Vitali in a gym and sweatily introduced myself. Instead of the boulders I had expected to find him bench-pressing, he was twirling tiny weights around delicately, as if in majorette training. Nonetheless, he is in unfeasibly strapping shape at 53, and Wladimir similarly so at 48.

Sitting opposite me now across a vast conference table, back in Vitali's

air-conditioned office at Kyiv city council, everything about them both is huge, from the four enormous exposed forearms and biceps that could crack walnuts to their big boxers' noses and their giant shovel hands.

Dr Steelhammer and Dr Ironfist, as they were nicknamed in their boxing days – a reference to both their PhDs as well as their toughness in the ring – may look so similar that even locals confuse them, but are quite different characters. Wladimir, confidently fluent in English – along with German, Russian and Ukrainian – is wry but reserved, while Vitali, whose English is more idiosyncratic and occasionally poetic, projects an image of aloofness, but quickly shows himself to be warm and even goofy. "I'm very famous for the jokes," he says. "I like jokes very much."

Now, the pair are the subject of a new documentary, *Klitschko: More Than a Fight*, directed by the Oscar-winning Scot Kevin Macdonald. Even Vitali recognises that theirs is "a very unusual story. Two brothers, both successful in sport – the same sport. And we're never fighting," he says. "We're competing, but we try to compete to help each other. I know, when my brother is close to me, my back is covered."

We are just metres from Independence Square, scene of the 2013 and 2014 Maidan protests against Viktor Yanukovich, the president at the time, in which Vitali took a leading role, and which is now a makeshift memorial of thousands of blue and yellow flags to honour the Ukrainian soldiers and civilians killed since Russia invaded on February 24, 2022.

But residents of Kyiv are – on the surface at least – defiantly living life. Its pavement cafés and bars are buzzing and, on a balmy summer night, you could almost be in any other historic, increasingly hip middle European city. But, that is, for the curfew, the holes in the sides of buildings, the armed soldiers strolling down the street, the sudden, widespread and lengthy power blackouts and the multiple daily (and night-time) air raid alarms.

"You came to Kyiv right now and you have the illusion of peaceful time," says Vitali. "Blue sky, sunshine, a lot of people in the street. But just a couple of hundred kilometres south or east is horrible. Destroyed buildings, villages, bombing, artillery, shooting, killing."

"You are in a city that was supposed to be conquered," says Wladimir. But,

ZELENSKY HAS PUBLICLY ACCUSED VITALI OF FAILING TO MAINTAIN KYIV'S BOMB SHELTERS



In Hamburg in 1996, following Wladimir's Olympic gold



The brothers visiting the site of a Russian missile strike on a residential building in Kyiv, March 2022

he adds, "It's very fragile. A week ago with Okhmatdyt, it was the same way. Beautiful sunny day. Boom. Within three minutes of the air siren, the hospital was destroyed, lives were taken. Not just some lives, children." On July 8, Russian missiles hit the Okhmatdyt Children's Hospital, the country's biggest paediatric unit, killing two and injuring dozens more.

Almost 900 buildings have been destroyed so far in Kyiv and more than 200 civilians killed. "And every day, sometimes twice, three times a day, we listen to the air raid alarm, which means everyone has to go to the bunker, because safety right now is the main priority for everyone," says Vitali.

But two and a half years into the war, people are less compliant. Many do not head to the shelters with every air raid alarm. When, in the small hours, I dutifully leave my bed for the makeshift shelter in the hotel's basement, there's only ever one other guest down there. The air defence system is working, locals say. On my final night in Kyiv, a drone is intercepted just above the left bank of the river, with the explosion audible across the city. The night after that, 35 Russian drones are shot down.

All of which means Vitali's role as mayor is a curious one. He is, by turns, a paternal figurehead and cheerleader, boosting morale and offering comfort as he tours bombsites and hospitals and attends funerals, alongside dealing with the mundanity of metropolitan mayoring: planning meetings, roads, playgrounds.

At a fundraiser with their exes, Hayden Panettiere, second left, and Natalija Jehorova, in Berlin, 2015



'IF TRUMP DOES WIN, HE WILL CHANGE HIS POSITION ON UKRAINE'

Locals I meet grumble about his leadership and management, about all the money and attention being spent on the war effort when there's nowhere to park. He has, some say, done nothing about the city's crumbling transport infrastructure – the lack of bridges, the ancient yellow buses – but allowed developers to build gleaming “monuments to greed”.

“For everything that happens in the city, the mayor is guilty,” says Vitali. “One of the jokes that I make is: it's snowing, the mayor is guilty. Raining, too much water, the mayor is responsible. Windy, trees go down, also the mayor's responsibility. Sunshine, blue sky, great weather, nobody says, ‘Thank you, Mayor.’ The mayor is the crisis manager.”

These days, he no longer dresses quite as one would imagine a mayor might, for the planning meetings and the fundraisers, but rather looks ready for combat, with a wardrobe of snug black T-shirts, khaki trousers and matching bomber jackets. “It is my special uniform now,” he says. “Before the war, I had a lot of suits and ties, but it's not comfortable to go to bombed buildings on fire [in those]. And every day, I don't know where I will have to go in a couple of hours.”

The week before we meet, 32 world leaders pledged ongoing support for Ukraine at the Nato summit in Washington DC. Sir Keir Starmer repeated the new government's commitment to spending £3 billion a year on aid for Ukraine for “as long as it takes”, while President Biden pledged to provide Ukraine with five new strategic air defence systems.

“OK, lots of promises,” says Wladimir. “Verbally. Maybe we're going to get some of the weapons. Maybe F-16s tomorrow. Maybe six of them, maybe thirty of them. But on 2,000 kilometres of front line? It's not much. Yes, we're getting help and

support, but how much is enough? It's never enough as long as this senseless war is still going. And war is expensive. For morale, for finances, for lives – everything.”

Much was also made at the Nato summit of the organisation seeking to “Trump-proof” itself against the former president's potential re-election in November. On the day I meet the Klitschkos, Trump, having narrowly escaped assassination days earlier, is receiving a near-messianic reception at the Republican national convention, alongside his newly minted running mate, JD Vance, a man who has openly stated, “I don't really care what happens to Ukraine, one way or the other,” and who played a key role in delaying a \$60 billion military aid package from Washington.

Vitali is surprisingly optimistic on the subject. “The lesson that I have learnt in sport: never, ever talk about the decision before the fight. Let's see the decision of the American people [as to] who will be president of the United States,” he says. “If Ukraine loses, we all lose democracy. And Republicans or Democrats, they need a success story about peace in Ukraine, about democracy in the world,” he continues. “If Ukraine is not successful in this war, it will be a painful story, not just for Europe, for the United States and for the leader of the United States.

“If Trump does win the race, he will totally change his politics, his official position on Ukraine,” he asserts.

While Putin's forces are now their foe, the Klitschkos are half-Russian by birth – their mother, Nadiya, is from Siberia – and Russian is their first language. Their Ukrainian father, Vladimir, served in the Soviet army, and Vitali and Wladimir were born on military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan respectively.

Vitali tells a story about his parents asking if he wanted a brother, then telling him to collect coins as they'd have to buy him, before visiting his mother in hospital with “this small package. I was so excited.”

Excitement soon turned to childish resentment. “I'm not the centre of the universe and the whole attention goes to this small boy and I was very upset,” admits Vitali, albeit fondly. “It was very painful. I told Mother, ‘Listen, you don't like me any more, you like him, and I'm feeling alone.’ I have to live with this new world where much more attention is not to me, but to my brother.” As they grew up, Vitali claims that while he worked hard for everything, things came easily to the younger Klitschko. “Yes,” Wladimir agrees with a laugh.

Vladimir was a strict disciplinarian. In the Klitschko household, “We received every day tasks from our parents, what we have to do, and in the evening we have to give a report, what we did or did not do,” recalls Vitali. “If we didn't

do something, I was always guilty – and my butt would feel that.”

“Everything was lots of drills, lots of discipline,” says Wladimir. Before their father's funeral, when the brothers were setting out the uniform in which he would be buried, Wladimir recalled being woken up in the night and punished when his father's shoes were not sufficiently clean and polished. He looked at his father's shoes, ready for the funeral, “and I'm thinking, ‘I'd better clean them, otherwise he's going to haunt me all my life – ‘They put me in the casket in dirty shoes.’”

But that strict discipline has served them well, they believe – in boxing and beyond. “When you get used to it, when you do it from childhood, you can't do it differently,” says Wladimir. “When you're disciplined, it's a habit.”

Their father died in 2011. Having been among those dispatched to oversee the containment of the disaster at Chernobyl, one of the so-called “liquidators”, he later developed lymph node cancer, linked to his exposure to radioactive fallout.

As young teenagers under a Soviet regime, the brothers learnt to handle grenades and fire AK47s, while some sports – including martial arts, bodybuilding and professional boxing – were banned, which, the Klitschkos attest, only made them more alluring. “The Iron Curtain worked pretty well,” says Vitali. “We'd heard the name Muhammad Ali, but we'd never seen his face.”

Moving bases every couple of years, the brothers sampled a succession of activities laid on to keep the resident children out of trouble. “That's why I started with photography. And the next military base, it was go-karting,” says Vitali. He was 12 when he first tried boxing.

By 1996, Vitali was on track to represent the newly independent Ukraine at the Atlanta Olympics – the first time the country had appeared under its own flag. But he tested positive for a banned substance, received a two-year suspension and was ejected from the national team. (He has always claimed he took the substance unknowingly after being prescribed medication for a leg injury.) He suggested his younger brother – by now a boxer himself too – go in his place. Wladimir took home the gold medal.

I ask Vitali if it hurt to miss out, and there follows an entertaining exchange in which he admits – apparently for the first time – that he was envious. After much back and forth, Vitali concludes that the gold medal is actually his. “I won.”

The brothers are appalled by the decision to allow Russian athletes to compete at this year's Olympic Games as individual neutral athletes. “Disgusting decision,” spits Wladimir. “They're still Russians. And going back home, they'll be part of Russian propaganda.”

He is adamant that politics and sports are indivisible. "Politics and the Olympics have always been a tool, since Nazi Germany and the Olympics in Berlin," he says. "Always used for political reasons."

Post-Atlanta, the Klitschkos' boxing careers took off in tandem. They moved to Germany, from where they dominated heavyweight boxing for more than a decade, with 2005 to 2016 becoming known as the "Klitschko era". In 47 fights, Vitali won 45, all but four by knockout, while he himself was never knocked out. Wladimir, meanwhile, is considered to be one of the greatest heavyweight champions of all time.

Beyond the ring, the brothers also fulfilled their role as sporting superstars estimably; Vitali married the model Natalija Jehorova, with whom he has three children, while Wladimir has a daughter with his former fiancée, the Hollywood actress Hayden Panettiere.

Do they miss boxing? "I don't miss boxing at all," says Wladimir without hesitation. "I started when I was 14 and I stopped when I was 41. Enough is enough. It's full of challenges, full of joy, full of pain that is fear leaving your body."

"I miss training camps. I miss the competition feeling. I miss adrenaline. But I don't miss the boxing exercise," says Vitali. "Because 25 years, it's like prison. Morning, evening, discipline, no restaurants, no cafés, no discotheques, no parties, no life. My torture is over."

From the early Noughties, though, Vitali began making inroads into a new torture: politics, standing for mayor of Kyiv – twice without success – and in 2010 founding the party Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform. A vehement pro-European, when in November 2013 a planned agreement with the EU was abandoned days before it was due to be signed – with President Yanukovich reportedly bowing to pressure from Putin – Klitschko became a prominent leader of the Maidan protests, Ukraine's largest demonstrations since the Orange Revolution almost a decade earlier. After Yanukovich fled, Vitali announced his candidacy for the presidency, but withdrew to support Petro Poroshenko, then gave up his parliamentary seat when finally elected mayor of Kyiv in May 2014.

The Klitschko brothers are an imposing combination of brawn and brains; both keen chess players, Vitali tells me that after 31 moves he forced a check in a game against the mighty Garry Kasparov. But, given his physicality and former career, I wonder whether he feels he has been underestimated, particularly when moving into politics. Not just in politics, he says. "In boxing, in the beginning, nobody took me seriously," he cries, now extremely animated. "Tall, skinny guy without good co-ordination – everyone looked at me and said, 'He never will achieve results.'"

Vitali at the Maidan protest, January 2014



'A FEW F-16s ON 2,000KM OF FRONT LINE? IT'S NOT MUCH'

It's true that commentators were cruel, noting that Vitali was not a "fluid athlete", that he "moved like a piece of construction equipment" and was "robotic and ugly to watch".

"My decision to go into politics, everyone said, 'Boxer? Politics? No way,'" he says. "It gives me huge motivation to prove that I'm good." While it took three attempts for him to become mayor, he's been re-elected twice, each time with a larger majority.

It has come at a cost, though. Having led separate lives for some years, in 2022, Vitali and Natalija divorced after 26 years of marriage. He seems sanguine about the sacrifice. "One rule in life: if you want to achieve the result, you have to give 100 per cent of your energy to make your dream true," says Vitali. "You can't have a dream and be working a little bit. You have to give everything you can to achieve your goal. In politics, especially in my home town, when you're responsible for everything – education, transportation, medical care – it's like a big country. No time for yourself, almost nothing."

His three children – who are now in their late teens and early twenties – are a different matter though. "I feel guilty," he says. "I was always at training camps, competitions." He wishes he had spent, he says, "much more time with my children. But I tried to give to my children what I could." Certainly, he's given them height – his second son has stolen his father's title of the tallest in the family, at 7ft 1in, and plays for the Ukrainian basketball team.

Does he ever get lonely? "Yes," he says, then immediately tells me of his love of extreme sports – kitesurfing, mountain biking and in particular skydiving.

"I'm an adrenaline junkie," he beams. "Without that, life has no reason.

"I am a hunter of emotions," he declares. "And adrenaline gives me this

portion of power, my energy, and it's very important."

Wladimir, meanwhile, broke up with Panettiere and in 2018 – following her reported eight-month stint in rehab – secured full custody of their daughter, now aged nine. He's understandably reluctant to discuss it, but does show me a note she has written which reads: "My dad is mother father to me."

One relationship that cannot be skirted over is that of Vitali's with Volodymyr Zelensky. There's reportedly little love lost between Ukraine's president and the mayor of its capital city; Zelensky has publicly accused Vitali of failing to maintain Kyiv's bomb shelters to the required level, while the mayor said late last year that Zelensky was showing authoritarian tendencies that could be dangerous for Ukraine.

Today, he says that Zelensky has "the most difficult job in the world. Everybody hopes Zelensky doesn't make mistakes, because mistakes can be very painful for every one of us in the country. And honestly, I wish him to be successful, because from his success depends the success of the whole country, of all citizens." For good measure, he adds, "Unity is a key for success, peace and freedom in our homeland."

Vitali was, a decade ago, keen for the top job himself. Would he consider standing again in future? "Biggest mistake to make a dream about some position," he demurs. "Right now, the question for everyone is how to survive, how to stop this war, to save the country and save democracy and make Ukraine a successful, democratic part of the European family."

So, it's not a "no", then?

"Today, we have to be successful, and after that we can make the next dream or plans for the future," he says. "Today it's one dream for every Ukrainian: to bring peace back to Ukraine. Right now, it's unity." ■

Klitschko: *More Than a Fight is coming to Sky Documentaries and the streaming service Now on August 15*



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A group of women in sequined dresses are sitting at a table, holding drinks. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting a nightclub or bar setting. The women are wearing various styles of sequined dresses in shades of red, blue, and purple. They are holding various types of glasses, including martini glasses and champagne flutes. The overall atmosphere is festive and social.

'DOUBLE DOORS WERE THROWN OPEN

AND 20 OR SO WOMEN WALKED IN,

CALMLY STEPPED UP ONTO THE TABLE

AND BEGAN TO DANCE. I DON'T

REMEMBER MUCH AFTER THAT'

STAG DO'S WHAT REALLY GOES ON*

The booze, the brawls, the bad behaviour – it's the summer wedding season, which also means it's peak time for raucous bachelor parties. But, whisper it, do men actually enjoy them? Simon Mills comes clean

Simon Mills photographed
by Squiz Hamilton



***It's worse
than you think**

Remember Tom Wambsgans' bachelor party episode in series one of *Succession*? The scene where the odious Roy boys all met up on a New York railway siding and disappear into a velvet tunnel of booze, banter, blow and vice called Rhomboid, every dark pleasure and sexual kink expertly curated on a billionaire's budget and absolutely no danger, as wimpy Tom fears at first, of "waking up in Belgium with no eyebrows"? Well, 15 years or so ago, I went to a stag night pretty much just like that in London.

A very wealthy man, about to get married, invited his closest 30 or so male friends to a private club on the outskirts of town. We told our respective partners – wives, girlfriends etc – that it would be a fairly tame and innocent evening. Drinks first, then dinner. I don't think they believed us.

With camera phones confiscated and social media not yet invented, we sat around a large oval table in a clandestine force field of secrecy, enjoying Nero-like quantities of seafood and champagne. Then, as the plates were cleared, thumping house music cranked up on the sound system, double doors were thrown open at the end of the room and 20 or so women walked in, calmly stepped up onto the tablecloth and began to dance. The scene quickly descended into a grisly bacchanal, men getting up on the table to bump and throw shapes with the girls, some holding whole lobsters and bottles of Ruinart aloft.

I don't remember much after that. Having opted not to make the £1,000 contribution to the event that most of the other (mostly married) men had, I knew I'd be expected to leave earlier than anyone else (I was also married at the time), but this woozy, lawless debauchery – think *Eyes Wide Shut* meets *The Wolf of Wall Street* – would continue into the morning hours of the next day.

Was this stag do ever discussed by any of its attendees afterwards? Not once. A tacitly understood brocode was in place – this would be a night to remember that we all agreed to pretend had never happened. Was it fun? Yes, fun in the same way that peeing on an electric fence is fun. A buzz, yes... But you probably wouldn't do it again. As for the wedding? It went ahead. The couple are still married.

My own stag night, 25 years ago, was much more subdued – about ten people, beers at a west London Portuguese bodega, then a strangely enjoyable visit to the local Laser Quest facility, followed by a South Kensington nightclub. I was in bed by 2am. The next day I woke up hungover but happy that it was over – and grateful to have both eyebrows intact and to find myself very much

not in Ostend or Ghent. There was no tiger loose in my bedroom either.

Here's the worst kept secret about stag nights: all grown men grudgingly agree to attend and go along with their boysy, base-level vulgarity and ribald silliness, but none of them will actually enjoy them. As soon as the invitations are mailed out, there's a sense of doom and foreboding in the air, tempered by a laddish obligation and dumb tradition, plus an awful feeling that something terrible is going to happen... But yes, of course you will be there for your pal on his last night of "freedom". The truth is that no man genuinely looks forward to getting smashed with a bunch of other men, experiencing a cold-eyed and uneventful lap dance, and then chaining the lucky groom to an Amsterdam lamppost, a cock and balls permanently Sharpied on each arse cheek. Actually, neither Amsterdam (or Barcelona or Prague) is the number one destination for British bachelor bashes – it's Bristol.

Thankfully, the invitations to stag nights, stag weekends and even whole stag weeks, start to dry up in one's late thirties and mid-forties. Men on second marriages, with grown-up kids and dwindling testosterone levels, don't seem overly bothered with stuff like Spearmint Rhino jags, lost weekends and specially printed Bristol or Prague "tour" T-shirts for their soon to be re-betrothed buddies. There's even a rise in "woke" bachelor events – themed around spa weekends, treatments, smoothies and civilised fine dining rather than Jägerbombs and team mankini wearing.

Most damning of all is scientific proof that men never liked stag nights anyway. Ethnographic research from the Universidad Europea in Madrid (ironically one of the top destinations for European stag weekends) revealed that for all the lads-on-tour bravado, the booze and the strippers, men aren't really ready to rut any more. With 59 per cent of British stag parties now happening in Europe and stag activities accounting for almost half of all flights taken from the UK by men aged between 20-45, Universidad Europea's Daniel Briggs conducted his tourism, masculinity and violence-based research in stag-magnet fleshpots including Ibiza, Magaluf and eastern Europe.

"Often things get taken to an extreme level, without the consent of the groom or all the members of the group," says Briggs, citing ugly examples of drunk men getting lost in foreign cities, bachelor parties tying the naked groom to a door with clingfilm or even some very unfortunate and wholly unamusing deaths. "Men are pressured to take part in these rituals of extreme shaming and humiliation, often against their will." Briggs' conclusion? Grooms and groups of fun-weary men trying

to reenact Bradley Cooper and Zach Galifianakis's Vegas adventures in *The Hangover* movie aren't actually enjoying themselves at all – and, after a while, "would rather just go home".

'The groom lost his Tarzan outfit and ended up nude' What really happens on the stag do front line

Theo, 30

A few of us got into taxis and asked the drivers to take us to the "boobengarden" when we were on my brother's stag do. After initially trying to take us to a brothel, they realised we just wanted strippers. When we got there, all of us stood in a huddle in the middle of the place, not sure what to do. A really beautiful stripper came up to me and asked if I wanted a dance. "No, thank you," was my high-pitched reply. After we'd all paid upwards of £30 entry, we left after five minutes, tails between our legs.

Marcus, 35

Thirteen of us on a barge in Coventry. Suffice to say we did not know the rules of the waterways. We managed to piss off the locals so much they started hitting golf balls at us.

Matteo, 30

The best man booked the wrong dates at our hostel on the first night of the stag in Hamburg. So when I arrived, dead sober, to check in, I was told I couldn't until the next day. Did they have beds for 18 people that night? No, they didn't.

The problem was that ten of the guys had arrived earlier than me, in Hamburg at 9am, and had been drinking for nine hours. They were heading to me right at that minute. A mate and I scrambled to find another hostel, which we just about managed and paid for (the whole 18 beds). The rest of the lads arrived, absolutely out of their minds. Inside the hostel, they ordered more beers and smashed bottles on the floor. One guy even got in a fight out front because he wanted to stroke someone's dog who wasn't happy about it. After the manager of the hostel had saved us, this was probably not how he expected we'd repay him.

Henry, 32

We thought it'd be fun to take my brother canyon walking when he was violently hungover from the first night of his stag. He got hypothermia.

Lucas, 30

A guy on my brother's stag spent £5,000 at a strip club and had zero recollection



of it. He thought someone had cloned his card, even though others who were there recall seeing him having double-dances and plenty of champagne. He just couldn't remember any of it.

Ava, 31

We went on a stag do a couple of years ago – a joint stag and hen, which is essentially a massive piss-up weekend away with your mates. One day we all went on a casual country walk to a pub, where at the end of lunch, one of the couples got out some magic mushroom chocolates. We were offered a chocolate square each. They said, “They aren't that strong – it's just to make things a bit more jokes.” Cut to an hour later, when 25 of us were completely off our heads, trying to find our way back to the house, winding along country lanes and skipping through fields. It was only meant to be a 30-minute walk, but it took us nearly 3 hours.

Phil, 39

We were ten guys – friends and family members – in Prague fuelled by gin ciders and with a stag dressed in a tiny leopard-skin Tarzan outfit. The group included the stag's father and brother who are both policeman. We were at a rooftop bar drinking heavily and when we piled into the lift to head back down we started wrestling each other. But we wrestled so much we broke the lift. So we all waited, squashed in a lift, for an hour to be rescued. After a strip club, we ended up at a crazy K-pop night. The stag lost his Tarzan rag and ended up naked. Outside, he fell in a quagmire and had to hail a taxi butt-naked and covered in mud.

Oliver, 31

We went to Lisbon and dressed the stag as a Spanish señorita. It was about 11.30 in the morning when we sat down for our first drink of the day, hair of the dog from the night before. It transpired that we were sitting next to a French stag do who had dressed their mate as Ronald McDonald. So we made Señorita and Ronald have a beer-drinking competition. The Brits won, obviously – 20 lagers.

Noah, 32

I was on a stag in Prague with a pretty ropey guy who didn't really know any of us boys, because his sister was the maid of honour. He went missing on our first night there. After frantically scouring all the hospitals in the city, we finally found him on the third day, all bandaged up on a ward.

When we asked him what the hell had happened, he said he had been beaten up by local teenagers because he had refused to give them his packet of cigarettes. This story would have been believable, had the nurse not then told us that he had been found wearing no trousers and no boxers.

When we pushed him on it, he confessed. He had been thrown off a balcony by a brothel's security guard. One broken arm, one broken finger, one dislocated knee and zero travel insurance left him with a £15,000 bill.

Liam, 30

One of the older guys decided to stay at the hostel, rather than come out with us, on the first night of a stag in Budapest. When we eventually got back to the rooms that night, we found out he'd gone missing. He'd gone looking for his “jumper” in the middle of a city he didn't know and was too drunk to find his



ONE GUY SPENT £5,000 AT A STRIP CLUB BUT COULDN'T REMEMBER IT. HE THOUGHT HIS CARD HAD BEEN CLONED

way back. He ended up getting hit by an e-scooter and losing his wallet and phone. He still hit it hard the next night though.

Leo, 29

The stag's mates organised a fake “abduction” of him because they thought it'd be funny. They threw him in the back of a van with a load of men wearing balaclavas. He ended up wetting his pants in fear. But the best man wasn't uninvited from the wedding.

Ollie, 32

We rented out a castle in Scotland and filled it with rugby lads. When the groundskeeper showed up the next morning, he was shocked at the scene. In our drunken state, we had thrown all the furniture off the castle roof, so it was now strewn across the lawn.

Oscar, 32

My friend got too drunk on a stag and was invited back to a pretty wild house party with complete strangers. The next morning, he showed up in a bit of a state and told us what had happened. It turns out he accidentally did heroin at the party.

Felix, 32

I turned up late to my friend's stag in Barcelona, so I was much more sober than the other guys, who were all really drunk when we left the bar at 1am. I suddenly noticed this really muscly guy in a pink polo shirt was following us on the walk home. Every time I turned around, he was there. My friends were completely drunk, so they weren't aware of him, but I was thinking, this is definitely weird. Are we going to get beaten up or robbed?

We got back to the big, old building that housed our Airbnb apartment. It had an old-school rickety lift, and as we slid the lift doors shut, I saw the same guy walk into the lobby. I started to get properly freaked out. We were staying on the top floor. It was like a horror movie because the lift was going up the floors really slowly, and at the same time, I could see this guy was racing up the stairs, following our lift. He was a really big bloke, so I was about to tell my mates to barricade the door to our apartment, in case he tried to break in.

At the top floor, I pushed my drunk friends inside the flat and turned around, only to see the guy was standing right there. I blurted out, “Yes? Can I help you?” He leant in flirtatiously and said, “I'm here to party. Do you guys want to party with me?” Relieved, I said, “No, no, we're not gay. We're all just here on a stag do.” He just looked really disappointed and left.

Jacob, 30

There were four of us staying in a room in a hostel in Munich. Me, my brother ➔

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and his mate got so drunk that we ended up in bed by 10pm because we couldn't hack it. The fourth person in our room didn't turn up, but no one thought anything of it.

Around 5am, the door opened and it was Alex. He had gone to a strip club after we all went to bed, but didn't know the name of the hostel so got lost wandering around Munich. None of us were answering our phones because we were all passed out.

Eventually, he got through to someone else. It turned out he'd been trying to sleep on a bench at a U-Bahn station for two hours.

Max, 29

My uncle disappeared for 24 hours on my cousin's stag do in Nice last year. My uncle is the most cretinous of my dad's siblings. When I arrived in Nice with my dad, I was expecting to see my uncle, but he was nowhere to be seen. He just disappeared. Nobody knew where he'd gone and they couldn't get hold of him.

It turned out that as soon as he got to Nice on an earlier flight than us, my uncle had picked up cocaine from some random guy on the street and had gone out partying. The next day, he just rocked up at our hotel and said casually, "Oh, I got lost. I had to walk for miles down the coast."

The next evening, my dad passed out on the toilet in a bar and got locked in there for hours until someone found him. It was pretty sobering to see my dad and my uncle engage in such silly behaviour, especially because all the young guys on the stag were actually very sensible.

Jesse, 30

My older brother is a doctor in the army and so for his stag, his friends – made up mostly of doctors or army guys – organised a day out in the Lake District, filled with lots of outdoor activities.

It started in a car park and was coordinated by a local orienteering man who was an older guy. About an hour into the stag, they all noticed he was beginning to slur his words and get confused. Not long afterwards, he collapsed. The stag was derailed because everyone took the older man to the hospital. It turns out he'd had a major stroke.

Benjamin, 31

I went on a stag do to Budapest, where one of the activities that had been planned was going to visit the Roman baths. The groom didn't realise that we'd given him dissolvable swimming trunks until it was too late.

Will, 31

A stripper left a poo on the driveway of our Airbnb.

I'm always up for a hen do *By Robert Crampton*

I have got off pretty lightly over the years. I've never done the full-on four days in Amsterdam debauchery, although I've heard and winced at the stories of those who have. I've not had to swill cheap beer in Riga with men I don't know. My hairiest moments have been limited to go-karting, paintballing and narrowly avoiding a punch-up in a Scottish nightclub. Nothing too dramatic. And now I'm at an age when I either don't get invited or can legitimately swerve (to mutual relief) any invitation. Yet still, if cornered, I'd pay good money, big money, never to have to attend another stag do. With all due respect to the husbands-to-be over the years, several of whom remain my good friends, stag do's belong in the Ninth Circle of Hell. The clue's in the name: butting antlers? Pawing earth? Steaming breath? No, ta.

I have attended seven, plus my own, over the course of 40 years of going to weddings. Eight isn't many, but believe me, it's enough. I've declined an equal number. And sometimes, I guess, I was NFI, for which, much thanks. On a few occasions, especially within the family, there has been desultory talk of the men going out before a cousin's wedding, but it never amounts to anything. The women make fun of the idea, and the men don't much want it to happen anyway, so it doesn't.

The two most civilised stags I've been to both involved grooms who were serving soldiers. You might imagine they would have been rowdy affairs, and I've heard of a few that developed into Wild West-style bar fights between regiments. But those two, one when I was 25, one just a few years ago, were low-key. Quiet drinks in a country pub, listening to tales of army life,



I WOULD PAY GOOD MONEY, BIG MONEY, NEVER TO HAVE TO ATTEND ANOTHER STAG DO IN MY LIFETIME

no aggro, no macho posturing. Agreeable evenings, yet both would still have been more fun with women present. Because of military leave issues, both do's took place, in traditional yet now unusual fashion, the night before the wedding, which perhaps explains why they didn't get out of hand.

Thirty years ago, my future brother-in-law Colin's stag involved a go-karting session in Hull. He's a mechanic by trade, Colin, so most of his mates were skilled, experienced drivers. I treated it like going on the dodgems at Hull fair, ramming competitors, attempting suicidal overtaking manoeuvres and so forth. "Get that idiot off the track," boomed the marshal over the Tannoy, and that was me disqualified.

I still know some of those lads and these days, it's fine, we can talk about kids, wives, the absurdities of the modern world. But back then, the stag do was simply the exemplar of what a struggle it is for a group of young men unleavened by women to hold a meaningful conversation. It was the same at my own do (seven-a-side football followed by dinner). A decent enough evening, but contrived, a bit flat, inorganic, nervy, stagey. No wonder everyone drinks way too much.

Another time, in my mid-thirties, I found myself at a stag in a casino near Marble Arch. It was the late Nineties and some of my pals had succumbed to a *Reservoir Dogs/Lock, Stock* suited and booted geezer gangster vibe. Hence us all getting togged up in our Paul Smith suits and acting all Billy Big Bollocks up west. It was fun for about ten minutes and then you realise, blimey, casinos are boring.

Paintballing? That was about 15 years ago and my main memory is of how much it hurt. They turn up the pressure on the guns for stag do's, I hear. And everyone is too proud to wear extra protection. Result? We all got covered in nasty bruises. One or two of the guys were a bit overfond of close-quarters executions. I found the whole thing stressful, painful, fearful.

Another time, up in Elgin near Inverness, after watching the local football team play Cowdenbeath, a bunch of us ended up in a club. Inevitably, one of our number, a semi-famous actor who fancied his chances with anything in a skirt, tried it on with a local woman. Equally inevitably, she had a massive, overprotective boyfriend. I managed to talk this irate Scotsman down, but it was a close-run thing. Nobody's idea of fun.

Bottom line: I decided aged about six that girls were more fun than boys. So why would I enjoy an event from which the fun people are excluded? Hen do's, on the other hand, they sound like a right laugh. ■

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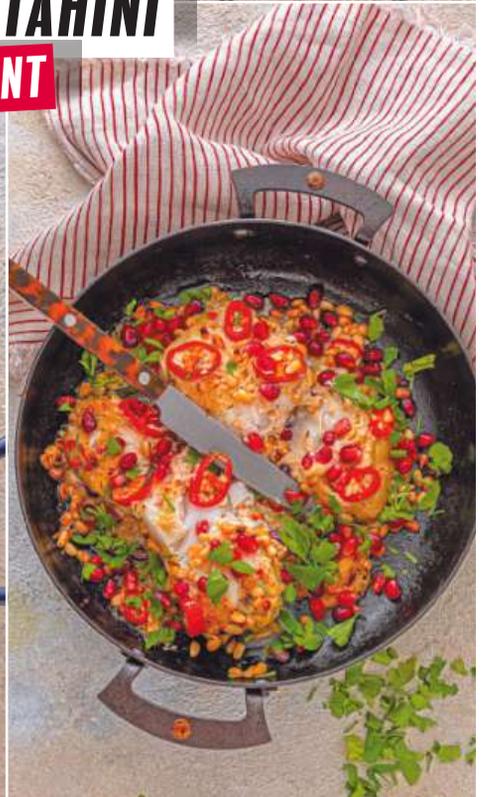
THE TIMES Eat!

Six summer recipes



JUST ADD A DOLLOP OF TAHINI

IT'S THE SECRET INGREDIENT





Modern foodies know tahini is as much of a staple as olive oil, mustard and vinegar. And given how versatile it is, why would you just use it for hummus when you could add it to a chocolate dessert or drizzle over aubergines? Always look at the ingredients, which should be all sesame – no emulsifiers or peanuts. Every chef has a favourite tahini recipe. Here are mine. **Hannah Evans**

BABA GHANOUSH

Serves 2

Smoky and nutty – making your own baba ghanoush from scratch is always worth the extra effort.

- 2 large aubergines
- 2 tbsp tahini
- Zest and juice of 1 lemon
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
- Small handful of parsley, finely chopped
- Salt and pepper
- 1 tbsp pomegranate seeds
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- Toasted pitta, to serve

1. Using tongs, hold the aubergines over the gas hob to blacken the skins for 5-10 minutes or until completely charred. Allow to cool.
2. Slice the aubergines lengthwise and scoop out the flesh. Throw away the skins. Sieve and drain off any excess liquid.
3. In a bowl, mix the tahini with the lemon juice to loosen it. Add the lemon zest, garlic and most of the parsley. Season to taste.
4. Mash the aubergines with a fork and stir into the mix. Top with parsley and pomegranate seeds, drizzle with olive oil and serve.



CHOCOLATE TAHINI TART

Serves 6-8

Chocolate and tahini go together like strawberries and cream. Here the richness of the chocolate is balanced out by the tahini. I like it in brownies and chocolate mousse too.

- 285g dark chocolate, broken into chunks
- 185g tahini
- Flaky sea salt
- 250ml double cream
- 90g honey
- 1 short-crust pastry case
- Strawberries, to decorate

1. In a bowl, combine the chocolate and tahini with a pinch of salt. Place a saucepan over a medium heat and add the double cream and honey. Leave until the mix begins to simmer, then remove immediately – it shouldn't boil.
2. Pour the double cream mix over the chocolate and tahini and leave for a few minutes while you wait for the chocolate to melt. Mix it together with a spatula – you should get a thick, glossy texture. Pour this into the pastry case and smooth the top over. Sprinkle with sea salt and leave to cool.
3. Decorate with strawberries and serve. Delicious with a drizzle of single cream or scoop of ice cream.

RECIPES Hannah Evans
PHOTOGRAPHS Romas Foord



BAKED TAHINI CHICKEN

Serves 4

A Mediterranean-inspired traybake made creamy and nutty by the tahini sauce.

- 150g tahini
- 2 tsp paprika
- 2 tsp ground cumin
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 8 large chicken thighs or drumsticks (skin on, bone in)
- 100g Greek yoghurt
- Salt and pepper
- 1 fresh red chilli, thinly sliced
- Fresh parsley, roughly chopped, to serve
- Lemon wedges, to serve

1. Mix together half the tahini, the spices, lemon juice, garlic and oil. Toss the chicken in the mix until everything is coated. Leave to marinate in the fridge for an hour.
2. Heat the oven to 180C fan/gas 6. Transfer the chicken to a baking dish. Cook for 35 minutes or until the meat is cooked through.
3. Whisk together the remaining 75g tahini and the yoghurt. Season to taste. Remove the chicken from the oven. Drizzle with the tahini mix and serve with the chilli and parsley scattered on top and lemon wedges on the side.



ROASTED AUBERGINES WITH WHIPPED TAHINI YOGHURT

Serves 2

Aubergines and tahini are a classic combination, but you can have this yoghurt dip with all kinds of roasted or grilled vegetables, and the parsley oil also goes nicely with roasted potatoes and salmon.

- 2 large aubergines, cut into rounds
- 1-2 large red chillies, thickly sliced
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- ½ tsp cinnamon
- Salt and pepper
- Olive oil

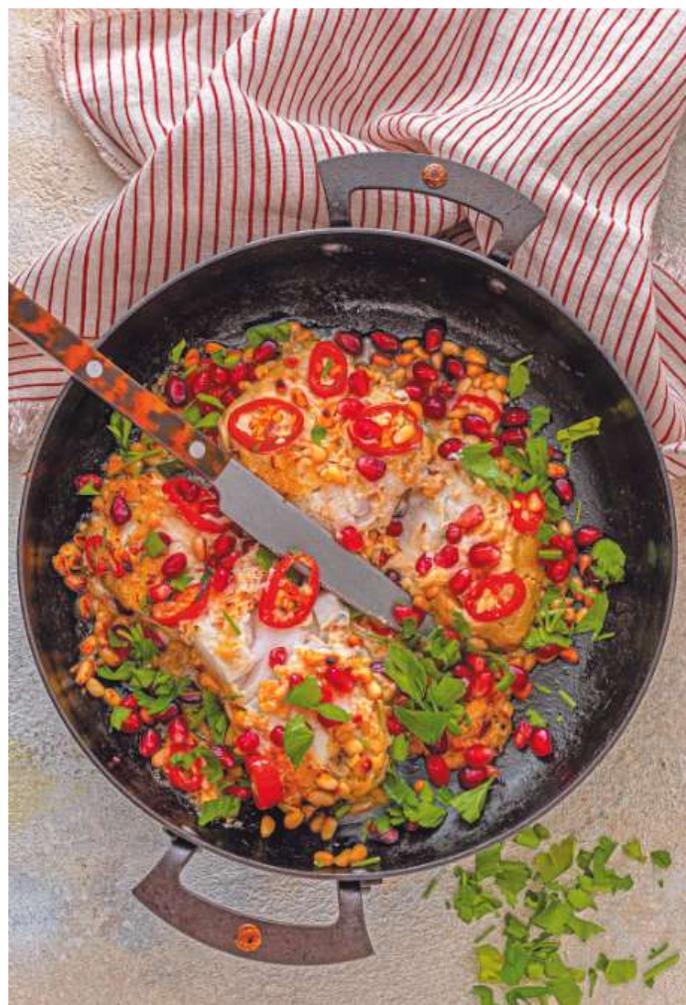
For the dressing

- 150g tahini
- 70g Greek yoghurt
- A pinch of ground cumin
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
- Squeeze of lemon juice

For the parsley oil

- 40g parsley
- 1 garlic clove, peeled and finely chopped
- 90ml olive oil
- 1 lemon, skinned, pith removed and segmented

1. Preheat the oven to 220C/gas 9. In a large bowl, toss the aubergines with the chillies, cumin, cinnamon, salt and pepper and enough oil to coat everything.
2. Arrange the aubergines on a baking tray lined with



greaseproof paper and roast for 45 minutes or until golden.
 3. Mix together all the ingredients for the dressing, adding cold water to loosen it if needed, until you get a thick, glossy texture.
 4. In a blender, whizz together the ingredients for the parsley oil. Arrange the aubergines on a plate and drizzle with the tahini yoghurt and parsley oil. Great served with flatbreads.

SPICY TAHINI NOODLES

Serves 2

This is comfort food dialled up: the silky tahini makes this rich and savoury, and crispy chilli oil adds an extra kick and some crunch.

- 200g egg noodles
- Sesame oil, for cooking
- Large handful of spinach
- 4 spring onions, thinly sliced, to serve
- Sesame seeds, to serve

For the tahini chilli oil

- 5g ginger, peeled and grated
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
- 2 tbsp crispy chilli oil
- 2 tbsp tahini
- 2 tbsp soy sauce
- 1 tbsp rice vinegar
- 1 tsp sugar

1. Cook the noodles in boiling water following packet instructions, then drain, reserving a little of the cooking water.
2. Mix together the ingredients for the tahini chilli oil. Add a splash of the noodle water and mix again.

3. Heat some sesame oil in a pan over a medium heat. Add the chilli oil mix and wait until it sizzles. Toss in the noodles, then the spinach and make sure everything is coated. Divide between two bowls and top with spring onions and sesame seeds.

BAKED FISH WITH TAHINI SAUCE

Serves 2

Tahini takes the place of dairy in lots of Middle Eastern fish recipes. This one goes big on flavours without feeling too heavy.

- 150g tahini
- 1 garlic clove, peeled and crushed
- Zest and juice of 1 lemon, plus 1 tbsp lemon juice
- Sea salt and pepper
- 2 cod loins
- ½ tsp cumin
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- Flour, for dusting
- 1 chilli, thinly sliced
- 1 tbsp pine nuts, toasted
- Handful of fresh parsley, roughly chopped, to serve
- Pomegranate seeds, to serve

1. Add the tahini, garlic and 1 tbsp lemon juice to a bowl with 30ml water and a pinch of sea salt. Mix until you have a creamy consistency. Set aside. Marinate the fish in the lemon juice and zest, cumin and olive oil. Season and leave for 15 minutes.
2. Preheat the oven to 180C fan/gas 6. Dust the fish with plain flour and, in a pan, fry until golden. Transfer to a baking dish.
3. Pour the tahini mix over and add the chilli and pine nuts. Bake for 5 minutes, then serve with the parsley and pomegranate seeds. ■



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NAKED TRUTH

**WHY I HAVE A BUST OF MY
BODY ON MY MANTELPIECE**



Claire Cohen photographed
by Robert Wilson.
Opposite: Claire's bust
shot by Romas Foord



Dismissed by doctors for decades, Claire Cohen has suffered debilitating pain from endometriosis and adenomyosis since her teens. The result? The 40-year-old writer has a love-hate relationship with her body. Could posing naked for art change that?

can't remember the last time I took off all my clothes in a stranger's house, but I'm willing to bet it wasn't in the name of art. Also, I think as I slip the sheer robe I'm wearing off my shoulders cursing the British weather, it probably wasn't this chilly – goose-pimpled flesh not being ideal when the look you're going for is smooth and alabaster. The *Venus de Milo* appears more serene than shivery.

I'm here thanks to Instagram. A few weeks earlier, I'd noticed that a writer – someone the same age as me, just 40 – had posted a picture of a small sculpture on her profile. It was the headless torso of a woman. She had, the writer explained, just posed for a 3D-printed statue of her own body because, let's face it, she might never look this good again.

That made me sit up. I didn't find it vain, rather absolutely incredible that there were women out there who felt confident enough to pose naked for a piece of art that would sit in their own homes, on a plinth of all things. But here they were in their droves, posting dressing-gown selfies and photographs of their statues all over the social media profile of the company that creates them, Studio Bust. There were pregnant women who wanted to capture their bumps for posterity, those who had been through illness and were celebrating survival, as well as some who simply thought it was a cool thing to do.

I studied them as though they were another species. I don't much like posing for photos with my clothes on, let alone starkers. It can feel awkward enough to have a photographer staring at you through a camera lens. But a 3D scanner being run past my naked body? Would I dare? And could it actually be a balm for my body hang-ups?

My relationship with my body is best described as strained. At school, I was bullied for being skinny – my knobbly knees and twiggy legs never filled out the cycling shorts and pedal pushers that were fashionable at the time. Girls would call me "anorexic" (I wasn't) and ask why my trousers didn't fit, as they tugged at the loose material hanging around my thighs – a gesture I would then repeat in front of my bedroom mirror, wondering why I couldn't just be "normal".

For years, I wore baggy jeans and padded bras to disguise the fact I was a late bloomer – still childlike, when all I wanted was to look womanly like everyone else. But what I didn't anticipate – couldn't have anticipated – was that womanhood would bring with it a new set of challenges and that how I looked on the outside would be utterly at odds with what was happening within.

To all appearances, I appear to be perfectly fine. I have a healthy BMI and

am a size 10. My weight doesn't fluctuate much and I know how fortunate that makes me.

But what does fluctuate is my stomach. Every month, it bloats and distends thanks to my two gynaecological conditions: endometriosis (where the womb lining grows outside the uterus, causing internal bleeding, pain and scarring) and adenomyosis (where the lining grows inside the muscle wall of the womb itself). Despite one in ten women being thought to suffer, there are no cures for either.

I spent much of my late teens, twenties and thirties in agony, being told by a succession of GPs and consultants that I was simply "unlucky", had "bad periods" and was "prone to cystitis". It took two decades and endless, draining hours of my life begging for help for a doctor to really consider why I was lying on my bedroom floor with agonising abdominal pain for several nights each month, my fist in my mouth to muffle the sound of my sobs, as my husband stroked my hair.

It's hard to fully compute, let alone communicate, the impact of spending most of your adult life being told that there's nothing seriously wrong with you and that it's probably all your fault anyway – too much alcohol, being "run-down" after late nights, not going to the loo quickly enough after sex, wearing underwear that's "too tight". When your distress is dismissed over and over, you internalise the idea that your body is somehow inherently bad. You absorb the message that *it* is the thing letting you down, not the medical profession.

As I said, strained.

After laparoscopic surgery in March 2022 to diagnose both conditions and laser off some of my endometriosis, I suddenly found that I had more headspace. Entire weeks would pass without pain or having legs so heavy I struggled to walk upstairs and it meant that – for the first time in my adult life – I could reflect on my body, rather than simply existing in survival mode. I started to realise how much distance lay between what I saw in the mirror and what was in my own head.

Not that I look in the mirror that much. It's easier not to stare at the bloated belly, the body that let me down and the face of the person who didn't fight hard enough to be heard. On some days,

Preparing for her 3D scan



I hardly ever look at myself, but here I am, in the buff, in front of a full-length mirror

I feel that it has betrayed me. On others, that I betrayed it.

What I'm describing is, I think, a love-hate relationship. On the one hand, I have a body that keeps me alive and largely functions as it should. I know what the opposite looks like because my brother died of cancer in 2017, after years of gruelling chemotherapy, operations and suffering. He was only 48 and while entering that decade myself brought with it some trepidation about ageing, I also understand that growing old is not something to be taken for granted.

But, on other days, my body makes me feel angry. How dare it have had such a debilitating impact on my social life, work, relationships, sleep, holidays? What right does it have to make me feel old before my time? I hate the lack of control and, yes, sometimes I hate my body itself. Why not, when I feel like it hates me?

I'm not alone. A study of 315 women with endometriosis, by psychologists at the Cairnmillar Institute, Australia, published in 2023, concluded that most had feelings of being "defective", "at war" and "alienated" from their bodies. The researchers wrote that "women with endometriosis constitute a sub-group of the population that may be at higher risk of suffering from severe body issues". Tell me something I don't know.

What I would like is to accept that it's my diseases that are the bad guys, not my body. To feel pride that I've managed to achieve the things I have – to have a career I love, maintain a marriage,

The finished sculpture of Claire Cohen



Other artworks by Studio Bust

friendships and travel – with all this going on. And I’m hoping that Mads Montagu-Andrews, the founder of Studio Bust, can help, which is why I find myself standing upstairs in a mews house in west London owned by her parents-in-law, flinging my dressing gown on the sofa.

The 31-year-old started the business in 2020, when pregnant with the second of her three daughters and in search of a way to capture her bump for posterity. Several companies in Europe were experimenting with 3D-printed sculpture, but no one in the UK had picked up on the idea, so Montagu-Andrews – previously a pastry chef at Skye Gyngell’s acclaimed London restaurant, Spring, and a food stylist – pounced. The result is a studio in London, as well as pop-ups in Paris, New York and Los Angeles, where around 40 women every month are scanned for their very own objet d’art, at a cost of £450 for a 15cm 3D-printed lacquered bust right up to £3,500 for a 30cm hand-forged bronze.

In the UK, around 60 per cent of her clients, says Montagu-Andrews, are pregnant – but increasingly, she’s seeing women pass through her doors who are about to have mastectomies, have struggled with ill health (one statue I spy in the studio features a stoma bag) or have been the victims of sexual assault and want to reclaim power over their bodies, as well as a huge number of women who choose it to mark a milestone birthday. Her youngest clients are in their twenties; the oldest so far in her early seventies.

Surely if they can do it, so can I? What particularly appeals is that there’s no need to sit for hours posing for a portrait or traditional sculpture, with nothing to do but dwell on your own body. Nor are any naked photographs taken of you (internet leaks always being uppermost in one’s mind), as it’s all done via anonymous 3D scans and digital models. At least, that’s what I’m telling

myself as I walk down the cobbled street that leads to the studio.

Most women find that arranging the appointment ends up being the scariest bit, says Montagu-Andrews, making me a cup of tea in her cosy sitting room and showing me the different finishes (I choose a lichen that will complement my green walls at home) and asking whether I fancy being on a plinth, before we head upstairs to begin what is an extraordinarily quick process. She whips out a white plastic machine that looks like a cheap handheld steamer, but is in fact a high-tech and expensive 3D scanner – using it to work with women can feel, she tells me, like a quiet rebellion given that the technology is often used in male-dominated spaces, from car engineering to aerospace. She does all the digital editing herself – “It’s really important as that’s my maker’s mark on the piece” – and then 3D-prints them at the Hampshire home she shares with her husband, Theo.

She directs me into five different poses – from a classical “Greek” style, with sassy bent hip, to a more modern “back twist” with one leg forward. There’s no denying that standing in the buff, in front of a full-length mirror, with my hands resting on top of my head to elongate my figure, is confronting. I hardly ever look at myself for more than a few seconds, but here I am. Montagu-Andrews is gently matter-of-fact about it all, telling me to relax my shoulders, work out which leg feels more comfortable to put my weight on and adding that I can look at the ceiling if

I’m not going to hide my nude bronze – even when the in-laws visit

I don’t want to stare at myself in the mirror. But I find that I am not as critical as I might be at home. After all, I made it here and I’m actually doing this. If not instantly empowered, I feel quietly confident to see my body in a different context – as something from which art can be created.

I wobble as she walks around me, the scanner in her hand, for 20 seconds. But then the first pose is done and a silvery 3D image of my figure pops up on screen. You can see every lump, bump and hair – although the printing process will smooth things out a bit. But mainly what I’m thinking is that I look like a superhero made of molten metal.

All five poses done, taking around two minutes, I choose my top three and we repeat them in the hopes of less wobbling (my feet, not flesh). And that’s it. That evening, Montagu-Andrews emails me those final three and I pick my favourite to be forged in bronze, which takes between three and four months. It will cost £1,700. For obvious reasons, I won’t be able to display my torso anonymously on a shelf, safe in the knowledge that my in-laws can come for lunch and not know it’s me they’re looking at over their Sunday roast. But, still, I find that I can’t wait to see the finished thing – yes, I might have been trying to suck in my stomach a little when posing, but it’s going to be the real me, not some idealised, classical version of my body. I think of all the busts of real women that I turned over in my hands downstairs in Montagu-Andrews’s sitting room and how, instead of wondering what was wrong with them, marvelled at how incredible they all looked.

And the version of me that arrives in a box, months later, is different from the woman I usually see in the mirror. Instead, Montagu-Andrews has captured someone with her arms happily – triumphantly, even – in the air and her hip curving confidently to one side. This doesn’t look like a person who hates how she looks, but someone who wants to celebrate it. It couldn’t be further from how I’ve felt about myself for all these years and it makes me realise just how desperately I needed to see myself in a new light. Rather than pushing my body away, I want to hold this one and run my fingertips over her smooth, cold surface.

By doing what scared me and showing Montagu-Andrews the body I found so disappointing, I made space for her female gaze – the one I am now trying to see myself through. Because the bronze me that now sits on a plinth in my study is just as much my body as the one sitting here typing these words. She’s my new mirror and I won’t even be hiding her away when we have guests over. I’m proud of the version of me who wanted to do this and not feel sad about her body any longer. And, yes, that includes the in-laws. ■

CHANGE A LITTLE, CHANGE A LOT

THE SAME... BUT BETTÈR

It's hard to improve on a classic like the Big Mac – but McDonald's head of menu has beefed up the flavour even more. Food writer **Emma Sturgess** finds out how

Fifty years is a long time in the restaurant industry. Foodie reputations have been made (and lost) in far less time. And the British high street today is a different place from Powis Street in Woolwich in 1974, when glam rock dominated the charts, Harold Wilson was in No 10 and the UK's first McDonald's opened.

We quickly embraced it. When I was growing up, there was no more boastworthy occasion than a McDonald's birthday party. The year 2000 may not have brought jet packs, but the new McFlurry was just as big a deal.

These days, McDonald's Chefs' Council is constantly innovating, brainstorming trends and planning limited-time-only menu items. (Recent highlights include the Philly Cheese Stack and the Hat Trick burger.) But there's no change more pivotal than one unveiled this April.

The goal was to dial up the deliciousness of the core burger range without losing what is so loved by OG fans – who include many a chef after a hard shift. Helmed in the UK and Ireland by McDonald's head of menu Thomas O'Neill, it was a huge project.

"Ray Kroc, who built the McDonald's empire, said we take the hamburger business more seriously than anybody else," says O'Neill – himself partial to details like grill pressure settings, patty temperature and mouthfeel. "People love our burgers the way they are, but we've found a way to just turn up the volume on the bits they love the most."

There's been no change to the 100 per cent British and Irish beef patties made from whole cuts of forequarter and flank. But to bring the flavours into focus, O'Neill and his team have made some clever tweaks to the burgers and the way they are prepared in the nearly 1,500 McDonald's restaurants in the UK and Ireland.

A new bun recipe brings contemporary brioche-style flair and the gentle sheen beloved by burger connoisseurs. Chris Watson is head





Bread for success
Chris Watson of Aryzta Bakeries, a supplier of the improved buns; opposite, Thomas O'Neill



QUALITY FROM THE GROUND UP

A great burger begins with quality ingredients, and beef farmers are at the heart of that. McDonald's is funding research into alternative ways of grazing, helping beef farmers reduce their impact on the environment as well as improving animal welfare and farmer wellbeing and, of course, a superb end product.

And because good fries are also non-negotiable, a £1 million Sustainable Fries Fund is powering British potato farmers towards optimised water use and better soil quality.

Sustainability is also a focus in the bakeries that supply those new, improved buns. High-tech heat-retention systems and careful management of food waste are some of the actions being taken to reduce environmental impact.



of product and business development at Aryzta Bakeries, one of McDonald's bun supplier partners. "We've made simple improvements in taste, texture and flavour," he says. "Softness is key – you want a soft, pillowy bun to bite into."

The flavours now match the delights within: the mustard and ketchup in a Quarter Pounder with Cheese, the subtle taste of dill in the legendary Big Mac sauce. They are also toasted for slightly longer, so that the buns hold onto that heat.

In the restaurant, the changes start on the grill, which clamps down from above to cook each patty from both sides. "It closes quicker and then releases," says O'Neill, "so you get the sear first and then lock in that taste and juiciness – and the patty is hotter."

This means when the cheese hits the burger it is smoother and meltier. Crew members also now add diced onions to the Hamburger, Cheeseburger and Big Mac at the grill. This new proximity suits both onions (which soak up the beefy juices) and beef (which gains extra flavour).



PEOPLE LOVE OUR BURGERS, BUT WE'VE FOUND A WAY TO SLIGHTLY ENHANCE THEM

THOMAS O'NEILL, HEAD OF MENU

This all sounds great, but the proof of a burger is in the eating. So I run my own taste test in my local McDonald's, where an almost comically perfect wreath of steam rises from my hamburger as I unwrap it. The bun is giving serious toasted caramelisation, deeply coloured and toasty, and although the flavour of the patty is familiar to this enthusiast, it tastes like the kitchen is having a great day. And in the Quarter Pounder with Cheese box, alchemy seems to have occurred; busting out of its bun like the big eat it is, the juicy patty is enhanced by melting cheese, in a springy, sweet bun that can handle the challenge. I'm not going to admit to also eating a Big Mac at the same sitting, but let's just say everything seems to be on point.

It looks like McDonald's reputation with successive generations is in good hands.



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PLAN FOR CHANGE

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**'THE OFSTED INSPECTOR
IS COMING TOMORROW.
I'M IN A COLD SWEAT'
CONFESSIONS OF A
STATE SCHOOL HEAD**



Sammy Wright, the head of a comprehensive, has written a book about what's wrong with

Sammy Wright with pupils
at Southmoor Academy,
Sunderland, photographed
by James Glossop



Britain's education system. Too many exams for starters, he tells Rachel Sylvester

The motto at Southmoor Academy in Sunderland is “Aspire, Achieve, Enjoy”. In the entrance hall to this comprehensive in one of the most deprived parts of the northeast of England, photographs of pupils playing ping-pong and the piano hang alongside a picture of the King.

The school is not some chaotic no-boundaries madhouse. Signs in every classroom tell children to be “ready, respectful, safe”. There is a cadet corps as well as a drama club and a dance festival, but the priorities in the classrooms are unusual. Every teacher has “enjoyment” as one of their appraisal targets and Sammy Wright, the head of school, insists that education must be about joy as well as grades. “What is it worth if it isn’t enjoyable?” he says. “What is life about? We’re not economic machines just to produce outputs.”

It seems to work. Southmoor Academy is rated “good” by Ofsted and the academic outcomes are excellent. About a third of the 1,450 pupils go on to Russell Group universities and the school is a hub for Oxford’s outreach programme in the region. With a third of students eligible for pupil premium – a measure of poverty – it was named school of the year at the UK Social Mobility Awards in 2019.

For Wright, however, these accolades are not the most important measures of success. “People say school should be teaching skills for work,” he says. “No, it shouldn’t. Work can teach you skills for work. School should teach you skills for

have exams, but we need a story of education that isn’t about competition and being better than your neighbour. Education should be for everyone. At the moment, by having this very intense exam-based competition, what we do is we say, ‘Try this and then if you fail at that, try something else.’ It frontloads that sense of failure into too many people.”

As we sit down to talk in the head’s office, children are running around the playground below. Southmoor Academy has a swimming pool, a grass field at the back, sports pitches and music rooms. There is an emphasis on cultural visits and human relationships as well as academic achievement at the school. I ask Wright the best thing about being a teacher.

“I happen to have been to prom last week so that’s very much in my mind,” he says. “I always have quite an emotional response to the end of the year for Year 11s [the 16-year-olds who have just taken their GCSEs] and Year 13s [those who are leaving school after A-levels]. There’s something really incredible about being there at the end when you’ve been there at the beginning. You watch them interacting and behaving like adults, but you remember them as children and it is a real privilege to have seen that change.”

What about the worst thing? “You are aware, in a way that other people in society are not, of how bad things can get,” Wright says after a pause. “I can think of students I’ve encountered for years and then suddenly discover something terrible they’ve been living through. If you’re a social worker or a

WHY I DREAD OFSTED DAY AM I GOING TO PUKE IN THE PLAYGROUND?



On a bright Monday morning I receive a text halfway through period two. The text says: NOW. I know instantly what it means. We have received “the call”.

At 8.30 the following morning Ofsted will be here... I left a dramatic pause there, for all the teachers reading. The rest of you might not know exactly what is happening in that pause, but teachers know. There’s a quaking, a jelly-like feeling in the gut, a cold sweat and a sudden instability that makes one want to sit down. I imagine it’s not dissimilar to how people reacted to, “The Vikings are coming!”

There are no two ways about it, Ofsted – the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, which conducts the school inspections – is genuinely terrifying. No matter how much one rationalises it, there is a fear that comes with the process of inspection that few other experiences can quite match.

This is my fifth Ofsted. I’ve never been in truly car-crash territory – the kind of inspection that sits at the back of my mind as I walk, wobbly-kneed, across the yard to the head’s office on the morning of “the

And I am thinking, I know in general this is the right thing to be doing, but this feels massively pointless because I’m just teaching them what they need to know for the exam. I’m pushing a kid through something he really doesn’t care about. I could teach him poetry in a way that made him love it but I can’t.”

Having had a novel published, Wright decided to teach his pupils creative writing, drawing on things he had learnt

‘In an area like this, 50 per cent of the pupils feel school isn’t quite for them’

happiness. School should teach you skills for living and loving and caring and being a member of society and understanding the world that you’re in. School is about forming individuals and if we have good individuals, then we will inevitably have a good economic starting place.”

After more than 20 years on the front line of education, as an English teacher and then a head, Wright has written a book calling for a fundamental rethink of schools. It is called *Exam Nation* and the subtitle declares that “our obsession with grades fails everyone”. The message is stark, but Wright argues that the “moral purpose” of education has been lost in a blizzard of metrics and grades.

“I fear that there’s too much carelessness in how young people are formed,” he says. “It isn’t that we shouldn’t

police officer, you only encounter people when they’re in the trauma. As a teacher, you’re bumbling along thinking that kid’s lovely and then suddenly something can take the rug out from under your feet.”

Then there is a more routine frustration. “Sometimes you find yourself enacting things or pushing things that you know might be good for the aggregate but are not good for the individual. I know that I have to get my Year 11s the best possible English and maths grades. That is a moral choice because the way society is set up means they need those and they will be penalised if they don’t have them.

“And yet I can sit in a classroom, as I was this morning, and be saying to someone, ‘In *Ozymandias*, the word sand means time and death. Remember that.’

call". Here are the things I think about:

- Have I got any clean shirts?
- How long can I live off my savings if I am sacked?
- Am I going to puke in the middle of the playground?
- When our intake collapses and we have to make mass redundancies, will I be able to look my colleagues in the eye again?

Because no matter how sanguine you are and how well prepared, what gives an inspection its peculiar psychological intensity is that a negative judgment, as well as being a massive blow to the school's morale and self-image, can have huge practical implications. The intake of new pupils can drop as parents send their children elsewhere, which means a fall in budget: schools are funded per pupil – so each one who doesn't come represents a drop in income of around £5,000. That money is paid on a lagged timetable: so if you are down one year, you have no prospect of making the money up the following year and can be forced into hiring freezes or even redundancies. There are no other savings a school can make; 80-90 per cent of budgets comprise staffing, and the rest is mostly utilities and essential services. The students who don't come are invariably those whose parents pay attention to Ofsted and who have the resources and knowhow to make a change. If the student body alters in the wake of a negative judgment, it is likely to become more deprived and less motivated.

You are also likely to see a higher turnover of staff. The staff who leave are likely to be the ones who can – the ones with ambition and good references. Sometimes, the perversity of the process means that you lose the young, cheap, enthusiastic staff and keep the old, cynical, demoralised ones who are at the top of the pay-scale and are serving out their time to retirement. Given the length of time between inspections – two years, if the judgment is "Requires Improvement"; four years, if it's "Good" – these impacts can become a spiral of long-term decline; or, in the modern climate of academisation, the prompt for an aggressive takeover, with the attendant decapitation of leadership.

There are legitimate arguments that these effects might be an important part

of the process of improving school quality. But there's no denying the fact that they're bloody unpleasant for the people involved, and all of them can rapidly make a child's experience in the classroom worse.

This is the fear that haunts you – the worst-case scenario – and it comes with an agonising twist. Because the worst bit about Ofsted (the very worst bit) is that they are not really judging you. They are judging how the kids are: how they learn and how they behave. And while kids are lovely and I have boundless hope for the future because they are the future, I also invite you to a very particular form of the common exam-room nightmare.

Most people describe this as a dream where you are back sitting an exam, your mind a blank, terror congealing around your ankles. But imagine instead sitting an exam that consists of testing not what you know, but what 1,471 hormonal teenagers (at least 43 of whom properly hate you) can remember about their geography lesson from last week. All of which can be sabotaged in an instant by some dickhead setting off the fire alarm.

I'm being flippant, but there is something deadly serious about this. In the wake of the tragic death of Ruth Perry, a head teacher who committed suicide in the aftermath of her experience of inspection, the discourse has opened up about the impact of Ofsted on teachers, and in particular on head teachers. The combination of judgments that feel both highly personal and arbitrary, that are of you but not really within your control, that come without warning and yet can be life-changing, can be psychologically devastating.

As for our own inspection, everything turned out OK. By which I mean we were awarded a "Good" judgment and everyone could breathe again and focus on the actual business of teaching. But the Ofsted inspection process and its results tell us several very important things about the way schools are ranked, and why some schools "succeed" and some "fail". First, although the grade a school receives is intended as a reflection of the state it is in, the quality of the education it provides, it is not simply that. It is also a sentence: it has a direct bearing on the school's trajectory towards success or

failure thereafter. Second, it is Ofsted's job to take the holistic view, to look beyond the performance tables derived from the student's exam grades, and to dig into the daily experience of the school, in order to tell us definitively and objectively what a "Good" school is – and how that differs from an "Outstanding" school or an "Inadequate" one.

The problem with this is simple. The Education Endowment Foundation, the body tasked with ensuring education is evidence-based, has averaged the data on the disadvantage gap across schools that have received different Ofsted judgments. For each category, the gap is essentially the same, hovering at around 11 per cent: whether a school is outstanding or inadequate, poor kids still underachieve. And research by the Social Mobility Commission shows a clear correlation between the number of poor children in a school and the likelihood of it being judged "Outstanding" or "Inadequate". This tells us, in the clearest possible terms, that what we call "Outstanding" schools have two key characteristics: they are still hobbled by the same inequalities, and it is much easier to be outstanding with richer kids in your school. For many schools, the Ofsted judgment is a measure of their privilege, not their educational excellence.

During every inspection I have been through, I've always come away with the sense that the inspectors are principled, perceptive human beings who probably can see the qualities and flaws of a school with significantly more nuance than they are allowed to describe in their reports. They understand that a school is too complex to capture in a grade – and yet the mechanisms of inspection require them to do exactly that. They understand that the process is intensely artificial; that kids are on their best behaviour and that staff are terrified; that no one slept last night; and that, when they leave, normal business will resume. They understand that just as exams have little relationship to real life, so an inspection day has little relationship to a normal day at school.

on courses and as a writer himself. They produced some wonderful, imaginative work. "I thought, this stuff is fantastic – they're writing interesting things – and then I marked them and they were losing marks because they didn't have enough colons. So I had to tell them to get the marks, put in more colons and that completely closes down the expansiveness of it. For an English teacher, the knowledge blocks the creativity."

When a third of young people fail their GCSEs, a fifth are persistently absent from school and the most disadvantaged children are almost two years behind their wealthier peers by the age of 16, something is clearly going wrong. The new prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, has promised a sweeping review of the curriculum and assessment system as part of his programme of "national renewal". But the problems in education are stacking up.

There is a mental health crisis among the young, teachers are demoralised and school buildings are crumbling. Last year, Wright had to close the top floor of one block because of exposed asbestos. "We've probably spent about £6 million on the school in the past few years just to keep it ticking over. You think, just give us a new school and then you wouldn't have to keep patching things up." ➔

Flavours of Florida:
L'Atelier de Joël
Robuchon in Miami; King
Bao in Orlando; BO's Fish
Wagon in Key West



GO WITH THE FLO

From Michelin-starred French fare to the Cubano sandwich, in the Sunshine State fun is always on the menu, finds **Qin Xie**

Whether it's a Michelin-starred restaurant in Orlando, tempting food trucks in Miami or casual dining in Key West, Florida has something for every budget and taste. Add to this a diverse and passionate community and you have a stellar food scene that serves up something new every visit. So hop into a hire car and let your taste buds guide you to some of the Sunshine State's tastiest cities.

In Miami's hip Design District, you'll find Florida's only restaurant with two Michelin stars: L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon. Here, modern French creations such as diver-caught scallops in young coconut broth with spicy *yuzu kosho* seasoning are served in the romantic rouge dining room. Meanwhile, Disney Springs in Orlando is where you'll find celebrity chefs. At Jaleo by José Andrés, the extensive Spanish tapas menu is dominated by cured meats, cheeses and classics such as octopus salad.

The casual dining scene in these two hubs is just as exciting. If you plan to visit food trucks in Miami, be sure to seek out Twice Butter Taqueria for Mexican tacos stuffed with fillings such as shredded beef short ribs and grilled shrimp. There's also Moty's Grill, beloved for its pita pockets generously packed with chicken shawarma, falafel and fries. And in Orlando's vibrant Mills 50 area, you'll find a plethora of budget-friendly independent eateries. Try King Bao, where fluffy steamed bao buns are filled with everything from braised pork belly to crispy tofu.

If you want to soak up the state's Latin vibes and tuck into an authentic Cuban sandwich at the same time, both Miami and Tampa are strong contenders. In the former, the lively enclave of Little Havana is home to Sanguich De Miami. The mouth-watering Cubano – thinly sliced ham, gooey Swiss cheese and

crunchy pickles in toasted Cuban bread – is your essential order here. Equally legendary is La Segunda Central Bakery, which has been serving gob-smacking sandwiches in Tampa's Ybor City for more than 100 years. Its award-winning Cubano features three types of meat: mojo-marinated roast pork, smoked ham and Genoa salami.

Don't leave Florida before sampling some of its outstanding seafood – this is, after all, a state that has the Atlantic coast on one side and the Gulf of Mexico on the other. In Naples, the best place to mingle with locals is at The Dock at Crayton Cove, where the menu boasts such dishes as grilled swordfish with pearl couscous and macadamia-crust snapper with mango salsa. This may be a casual spot but don't be surprised if you see diners arriving by boat – it's the Old Florida way.

Further south, things get even more laid-back. In Key West, for example, BO's Fish Wagon prides itself on its "no shirt, no shoes, no problem" strapline. Its conch fritters and fish sandwiches are fantastic too. Florida has flavours to suit everyone.

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Stephanie, TUI rep

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While he says money would undoubtedly help – “The reason there’s a teacher recruitment and retention crisis is because they aren’t paid enough; it really is as simple as that” – the problems in the education system are not, in his view, primarily about funding. There is, Wright argues, “a kind of mass gaslighting going on” where too many children are set up to fail by a system that is designed for a certain group of more academic pupils.

“If you take a school like this one, where you’re in a deprived area, there will be 40 to 50 per cent of the kids coming with a sense that school isn’t quite for them,” he says. “Working-class kids are primarily the losers in education. And the reason for that is that education is constructed around middle-class norms.”

Michael Gove, the former Conservative education secretary, warned against the “soft bigotry of low expectations”, which meant that disadvantaged children were not pushed to excel academically. Wright argues that the focus on metrics and grades means that GCSEs end up “as a ranking device for saying who are the winners and who are the losers” before children have even had a chance to make their way in the world on their own terms.

“To me, a low expectation is to say that just because you’re a street sweeper, you don’t need to value poetry. My expectations are that everyone, regardless of their career, deserves dignity and enrichment. The risk we run is in devaluing lives that don’t fit an academic model. There’s no sense that worth might come from how you feel about your life.”

Wright sat on the government’s Social Mobility Commission for three years, but says he gradually started to question the principles underlying its work. “I did come out of it having a bit of a problem with the whole concept. To me, the perfect socially mobile society is a place where you have high equality and then moving socially – or in terms of job category – has no attendant cost. Imagine you have a world in which you can be a carpenter and you can have the same style of life as a teacher, a doctor or a banker. What you want is kids to get nines in their GCSEs and then go and be a plumber. That is social mobility.”

He finds the idea of meritocracy equally problematic because it implies that people can better themselves through education and so deserve their place in society. “In a meritocracy, you end up with a narrative that says being poor is your fault,” he says.

Wright, 45, grew up in Edinburgh and went to a state primary school, then won a scholarship to the Edinburgh Academy, a private school. After graduating from Oxford, he trained as a teacher and worked in London for 12 years before accepting a

job at Southmoor Academy to set up a sixth form in 2014. Within three years it was the best sixth form in the region. Wright, who has two children, aged 10 and 13, was promoted to deputy head and then last year he became head of school.

His solutions are radical. He wants admissions to be determined by lottery, schools to be smaller and more to run from 4 right through to 18, ending the tricky transition from primary to secondary. Instead of GCSEs there should, in his view, be a general qualification at 15 that covers the basic knowledge and skills that everyone should be expected to have. Ofsted must, he argues, be reformed with a school report card, rather than one-word judgments and annual inspections.

“All the things I’m suggesting are different ways of maintaining the rigour, but lowering the stakes,” he says. “Exams are just a tool. They’re just a thing that you use to learn something. The damage comes from reducing people to data points

‘Kids are falling off the edge and no one’s picking them up until it’s too late’

and saying that life is about a number or a grade or a wage packet or a status.”

He insists he is not interested in eroding standards. “When I teach English, I want people to come out of a lesson and go, ‘That was interesting. I enjoyed that.’ One of the real problems in education is we get caught in this thing whereby I say something like that and someone else might react going, ‘That’s happy-clappy.’ I make my students sign a set of rules with five things they’ve got to do. If I teach a GCSE class, I make them write an essay for homework every week for two years. I’m not dumbing down, but I also expect that during the lesson I will talk to them about how what they’re doing teaches them lessons about how to love.”

Schools, he says, need to be seen as communities rather than exam factories. He compares it to thinking of a house as a home rather than a property asset. “I can think of examples of so many students who have such trauma and difficulty at home that school is the place where they have functional relationships and they have a possibility of structure and they have hope and something to eat.

“One of the things the pandemic taught us is that school isn’t a knowledge delivery system. School is a place for kids to be while they’re going through a difficult stage [as adolescents]. We go through such change in that period that what we experience has a massive impact on

who we are and as such, we need to pay attention to the school environment, not just to what the curriculum is or whether or not people pass their exams.

“People might hear me say that and say, ‘Yes, but you’ve got to have rules in school.’ Of course you have to have rules. I’ve got rules at home. I’ve got kids and I gave them strict rules because that’s what parents do. Having school as a home is not saying that you don’t have structure and you don’t have rules, but it’s saying that you apply those rules like a parent, not like a police officer.”

There are no silent corridors in Southmoor Academy because, Wright says, “I think that kids interacting is important. I’m not saying I’ve solved it in my school, everything’s great. I feel like it’s a struggle. It’s not easy. I don’t think we’ve fixed everything, but I think we have the right moral compass here. We pay attention to the kids and we listen to them. We try to do our best for them.”

Wright argues that schools like his are too often picking up the pieces for the wider problems in society. “I had a fascinating couple of conversations with two kids, not from this school, who both present as having had heavy absence through anxiety. One of them was supported in a way that allowed her to attend and sit her GCSEs. The other one, the support the school offered didn’t work.

“The difference between them was that the one for whom it worked had a supportive home life, whereas the one for whom it didn’t had grown up with domestic violence and looked after his younger brother. Then in Year 11, his girlfriend fell pregnant and had a traumatic miscarriage. The thing that stopped him coming to school was all the other problems. The attendance crisis is a social care crisis and a special educational needs crisis. The kids are falling off the edge of things and no one’s picking them up until it’s too late.”

There must be a broader definition of success. “I don’t feel like I’m a super-head or a special teacher who’s got an answer in terms of how you run a school. I feel like I’m decent at my job. I just do what I can. But I do think that if you change the overall system, then you allow people like me – the kind of middle-of-the-road teachers and leaders – to do better. At the moment it feels like a battle, an effort to put square things into round holes. I just have this core thing of thinking that school is set up to make kids’ lives better. So why don’t they like it?” ■

Exam Nation by Sammy Wright (Vintage, £22) is published on August 15. To order a copy go to [timesbookshop.co.uk](https://www.timesbookshop.co.uk) or call 020 3176 2935. Free UK standard P&P on online orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members



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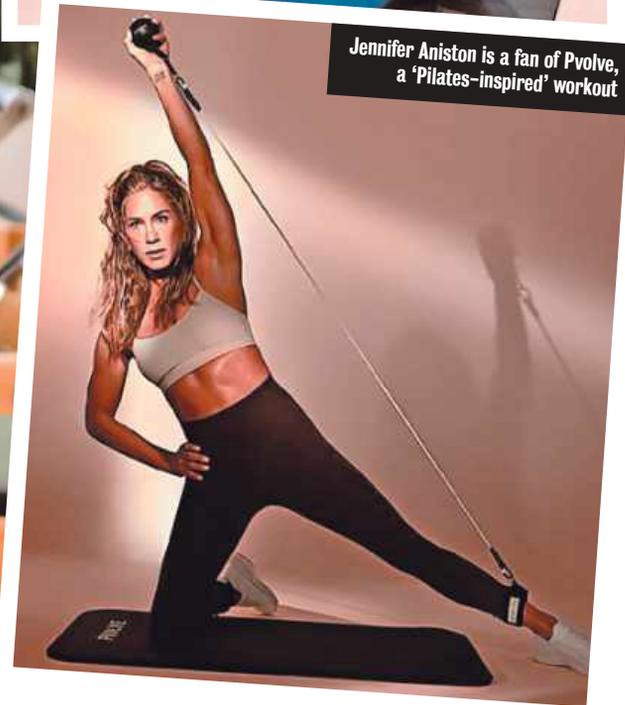
Have we hit peak Pilates?

David Beckham says Pilates has given him the 'best body of his life'. And he's not alone: it's the fastest-growing fitness phenomenon of 2024. But could rip-off classes and the race to make big profits be its downfall? Polly Vernon, a long-time devotee with the abs to prove it, reports

Reformer Pilates is a popular version of the practice



David Beckham does an hour of Pilates every day



Jennifer Aniston is a fan of Pvolve, a 'Pilates-inspired' workout

Over the past 18 months, outposts of a new breed of fitness studio have sprouted across the land like glossily branded pox: all brick and steel and gender-neutral changing rooms and high-impact messaging in super-directional fonts. They're called vibrant, thrusting things like SkulptKore and GluteReform, and they're aimed squarely at the millennial wellness market. Their classes are all distant – make that *extremely* distant – cousins of Pilates, specifically reformer Pilates, a variation that uses intimidating and impressive-looking sprung resistance machines.

Pilates is the reference point on which all these enterprises trade – it's a revered practice with proven results. Point is, they're making it *better*. By which they mean: sexier. Younger. Hotter. Higher intensity, more modern, more aesthetics 'n' TikTok-focused. You can tell by how extravagantly their websites boast about the club-like quality of their rooms and the boom of their playlists. It's all contributed to a sea change in the optics of Pilates, the once sedate, niche, medically certified practice that was “developed to heal people”, says Amanda Kassir, founder of Hollywood's sexiest Pilates franchise, Pilates by Amanda, earlier this year. “It was not this big, fun, hot-girl workout.”

“What I'm doing – low-impact sculpt – is the evolution of Pilates,” says fellow LA celebrity trainer Megan Roup. “I'm putting it to music. It's beat-based and faster.”

Shan't lie, I've been intrigued by the new studios. I'm a Pilates devotee; I've got 11 years of classical – ie traditional, non-sexy, non big, fun, hot-girl – Pilates under my slightly sweaty Lycra'd waistband; four classes a week minimum, three mat, one reformer. It has changed my body and my life and my fundamental sense of myself (from wispy weakling to Strong Woman, from someone who suffered from recurring lower back pain to someone who rarely does but knows how to manage it should it strike). I am evangelical about its potential and therefore interested in any developments.

So I thought I'd give one of these new-style classes a go. I find a nearby one that seems especially thrusting, book in at late notice (with surprising ease – my usual classes get booked up days, sometimes weeks, in advance). I'm also surprised by the price – an introductory offer of three classes for £50? Reformer classes are notoriously pricey; they generally cost the best part of £40 a pop – Pilates is my second biggest bit of monthly expenditure after the mortgage, but OK!

I turn up ten minutes early. The site tells me I should; as a studio newbie, I'll need to be inducted – and I'm greeted in a light reception zone by a lovely young

woman who insists I spend 12 quid on a pair of grippy socks. She shows me the changing room (divine, fully stocked with free shampoo and deodorant and Tampax; gender neutral, obviously), then the studio.

It's lined with 12 reformer machines of a type I have not seen before. Very new, very low and – honestly? To my untrained but pretty damned experienced eye? Kinda flimsy. Still. I understand the basic mechanism – it's technically the same as that in my usual studio, one moving carriage connected to a smaller stationary platform by a system of springs that can be released or applied for a lighter or stronger hold. Which is convenient, because when the very beautiful but only vaguely interested trainer turns up, she explains it all in perfunctory terms which aren't even entirely audible over the booming music.

Or maybe they're just barely audible to me – the oldest chick in a room otherwise populated by three earnest-faced millennials (and the beautiful, uninterested trainer).

I'm also, it will transpire, the only one who vaguely knows what they're doing – including that trainer. We start with a brief, insufficient warm-up that incorporates an instruction to rise up into “a glute bridge”, a traditional Pilates move of which, apparently, only two of us students have even heard (the other two are left to desperately copy us). But only one of us (me) knows how to do it right – by tucking your pubic bone round, up and under your body, lifting your spine sequentially, keeping your pelvic floor engaged and your ribs locked into a position that prevents your lower back from arching, because that can cause injury. But “Go as high as you can!” encourages the trainer, which makes everyone (but me) arch further still. From that point on, garbled, half-realised, muffled and confusing instructions are thrown in our direction, quite often without, say, a specification on which leg it is we're meant to be moving and in what direction, if it's the left or the right we should be pointing towards the ceiling or bending into “table top”, which leads to all of us checking in with each other for clues and the trainer reassuring us it's *fine* we're all getting it wrong, but could we maybe just do it *right* next time?

It's really patchy in intensity. Most of it is absurdly easy for me – I've been doing this for a loooooong time – but still, I've never left one of my usual classes without

‘I CRASHED DOWN AND HAD HUGE BRUISES, BUT THE INSTRUCTOR CARRIED ON’

Polly Vernon heads to the Pilates studio four times a week



A class at Exhale Pilates London



feeling substantially challenged – but then? One section is suddenly so ridiculously hard, half the class retires into child's pose and I get the giggles. There is no “core” section – no part focuses on the abdominal muscles and pelvic floor, traditionally the absolute baseline. Despite my telling the trainer I was rehabbing a knee issue, and her saying that was fine – “I always give modifications” (variations designed to accommodate injury) – she doesn't.

The class ends, admittedly, in the standard, acceptable way – we get off the reformer machines and perform a “roll down”, where you bend slowly forward, allowing your head to hang down, reaching your hands towards the floor, thus stretching out your spine, then roll back up again. “You'll probably find this much easier after the class than you did at the beginning,” says the trainer, which we might – if we'd done it at the beginning of the class. But we hadn't.

I leave, furious. This was a parody of a Pilates class, which, to be fair, it didn't have the audacity to claim it was. Instead



Joan Collins
in Beverly
Hills, 1976



Harry Styles on
the reformer in
London, 2023

it called itself something like INTENSE SPICY SUMMER CORE REFORMER BURNER but, like all its damned ilk, is definitely trading on Pilates' good reputation. And this? This was just *bad*. Weak, confused, wrong. An insult. A total waste of money even at the knockdown introductory rate. "Is it OTT to say I feel a bit tainted by that shit?" a mate, a fully trained, brilliant and experienced Pilates teacher, asks when I call her in a rage.

"No!" I say, then: "I'm not being a judgmental cow then?"

"You're just saying what the whole industry is thinking," she says.

The only thing I will say in defence of my terrible class is, I don't think it was actively dangerous. A low bar, but it gives it the edge on other examples of these new wave studios.

In June, The Times ran a report on a sudden spate of reformer-related injuries. A woman called Stevie Walton had booked a cheap introductory offer (sounds familiar) at a new studio in north London; during her first session, Walton said, "The resistance in the springs didn't seem right. There was no tension." She informed the instructor, then continued with the class, but would eventually find herself flung forward over the top of the reformer carriage, crashing down onto the machine. "It was extremely painful and I had huge bruises. The instructor asked if I was OK – but carried on with the class."

More seriously yet, in mid-June the London studio Heartcore Fitness paid an £80,000 interim settlement to a musician, Maya Meron, under whom a reformer machine had collapsed, leaving her with a fractured elbow and abdominal injuries.

"Once, I had someone come to me [from a big studio] where they'd been badly hurt," says Gaby Noble, the founder of Exhale Pilates, a small chain of London studios conceived and run according to the purest, most classical ideas of the practice. "They hadn't put the right spring on, they'd fallen backwards, hit their head and dislocated their shoulder."

What the hell is going on? How is any of this happening? Why? Is it even *legal*?

"First, there's a boom," Noble says.

Exhale trains the likes of me – your bog-standard clichéd, obsessive, up-herself Pilates purist – along with famous boxers, professional footballers and the pop star Harry Styles. Who, it should be said, is partly responsible for the boom.

"Celebrities are definitely driving it,"

Noble confirms. Margot Robbie does reformer Pilates too, you see, as well as LeBron James, David Beckham, who says it's given him the best body of his life, Jennifer Aniston, Hailey Bieber, Kaia Gerber, Kendall Jenner, Gary Lineker – *Stallone*, for heaven's sake. Karlie Kloss

and Miranda Kerr train with Megan "Pilates has evolved" Roup, who was hired by Chanel as "movement director" for its cruise 2023/24 catwalk show. Just a couple of weeks ago, the achingly chic fashion brand Celine announced it would be launching a Pilates collection, one which includes not just a logo'd workout set, mat, gym towel and so forth, but also a branded reformer machine, the frame and the carriage and the springs, the whole shebang.

As a consequence of which reformer Pilates is suddenly all over social media. "TikTok particularly," Noble says. "Which is fine – but it's all about pretty pictures, right? It's about a performance. I look at a lot of it and I think, that's not Pilates."

This has created a corresponding leap in demand among people who aren't hot celebrities or social media influencers but would very much like to look as if they are. In January, PureGym declared reformer Pilates the fitness trend of 2024, and Yelp announced online searches for it rose by 124 per cent, year on year, from 2022 to 2023. James Muthana of Momenze, the digital portal through which many fitness classes are now booked, estimates that 100 new reformer studios are launching on his app every quarter (although industry tracker IBISWorld puts the figure at nearer 100 new studios in the past year). The rush to cash in, service the boom, meet the new demand has collided with the urge to sex up Pilates, to make it more aesthetics-driven, more vital, younger, which has inevitably resulted in questionable practices, shoddy equipment and inadequate, rushed training.

"Big gyms are training PTs to teach it in a single weekend," says Noble, whose own studio trains its "apprentices" according to the classical principles, a meticulous business that incorporates 600 hours of teaching, can take up to a year and costs in the region of £6,000.

"From what I've seen, what a lot of these gyms and studios are doing," another Pilates mate tells me, "is expanding from one speciality of fitness – something they've taught really well for years – bunging in a load of cheap reformer machines, grabbing the trainers they already have, trained in that original speciality but clueless about Pilates, showing them how the reformers work, giving them set programmes they all have to follow, then telling them to teach something they don't get or care about."

Well, that makes sense of the terrible class I did.

"The worst thing," my friend goes on, "is that if a student comes to me for a class after attending those other studios, half of them give me reviews, saying I was slow and boring."

"The issue is no one really knows what Pilates means," says Gaby Noble. "It's" ➤



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an umbrella word. There are no regulations on [what it involves]. It's getting diluted."

It's perhaps a good idea to explain what Pilates *should* be, then; how it was created, what that means, and why it matters so much to some people.

It is an exercise system, a strength training method, based on a series of incredibly precise, quite peculiar movements developed during the First World War by Joseph Pilates. "Joe" was a German physical trainer, who'd moved to the UK as a young man in 1912 where he worked as a circus performer and boxer. During the war he was interned on the Isle of Man. There he cheerfully took on responsibility for the physical fitness of the other internees and the guards. Pilates concocted a series of exercises that could be performed in the space of a single bed (the size of a yoga mat, or a reformer carriage) and focused on the core postural muscles, the abdominals and pelvic floor, the glutes, the back muscles – everything that would keep the joints in alignment and support the spine. The principles (which he originally called "Contrology") spread and it became evident that the technique was especially effective in rehabbing injured veterans. Pilates began developing reformer machines after realising if he attached springs and straps to hospital beds he could support a better range of motion, and also gradually develop the use of weight, for bedbound vets.

In the Twenties, Pilates emigrated to New York, where he and his wife, Clara, founded their first studio, and developed a devoted clientele among the city's ballet dancer community and high society. Pilates died in 1967, neglecting to codify any of his teachings before he did. Pilates the exercise has never had an official definition, just a following of generations of devoted disciples with no desire to divert from what "Joe" wanted. His former pupil Romana Kryzanowska did at least develop the classical Pilates teaching method – the one to which Exhale and Gaby Noble still adhere. By the Eighties, Pilates had begun to find traction among the beautiful people. "When I did Pilates, I had the most fantastic figure," Joan Collins told me when I interviewed her last year. "Jane Seymour and I were the first people to do it in Hollywood."

Gradually it found its place in the modern exercise market, a niche but respected position, one enthusiastically endorsed by physios and chiropractors (it was a physio who packed me and some recurring lower back issues off to our first class). It's regularly prescribed by medics: Gaby Noble started doing Pilates "24 years ago [because] I had hypermobility".

But then lockdown Zoom workouts fired up celebrity interest, which led to social media obsession – which in turn led to the current state of affairs.



The violinist Maya Meron, who fractured her elbow when her reformer collapsed at a Pilates class

"Did you know there are places where they've got about 40 [reformer] machines in a room and only one trainer, but all the machines have screens next to them, and you get the exercises *from a screen*?" a Pilates insider tells me.

"There's one where the whole shtick is you switch between reformers to rowing machines and back," another says.

"Joe is turning in his grave," sighs a third.

"I don't want to be mean about this," Noble tells me. "In some ways this boom is good. It's making people curious. And it's bringing a younger demographic. At the same time we have people coming

'THE ISSUE IS NO ONE REALLY KNOWS WHAT PILATES MEANS. IT'S GETTING DILUTED'

from big gym chains with big reformer studios, PTs who have done training online, they've done in-house training on certain exercises, and they're in tears because they realise they don't really know anything."

Worse yet, of course, are the injuries, often a result of a medical recommendation leading a patient into precisely the wrong kind of environment.

"How do you know what sort of class you're going to end up in if they're all called Pilates?" Noble asks. "One of our apprentices had a separation of the stomach muscles after a pregnancy. She was told to do Pilates by her doctor. She went to one of these new dynamic reformer classes – because it was called Pilates. But her separation got worse. Those trainers didn't know what it was, or how to help. They gave her exercises that made her stronger but made the separation worse.

"Those sorts of classes can be a great workout. But don't call them Pilates. If you want the adrenaline, the music, the pretty

images for your social media... they're not Pilates classes, they're fitness classes. It's 'fitness on a reformer'. It's 'HIIT on a reformer'. Don't call it Pilates."

You will not be amazed to discover that all of this is being driven by a financial imperative. It is not easy to turn any Pilates business into a financial success. If you want to fill your studio with Pilates teachers classically trained to the tune of 600 hours, they're going to be more expensive; same for good machines, which cost around £8,000 a pop and require serious and costly maintaining.

In addition to which, "You shouldn't really have more than eight people in a mat class – six in reformer," one of my favourite mat Pilates teachers tells me. "Those classes of 20, 30? There's no way you can check everyone's form, make sure they're doing it safely."

"That's how you know you've got a good studio generally," the teacher I phoned in a fury following my terrible reformer class says. "If they've got no more than five or six reformer beds in there, you're probably OK."

But making money on that basis is really tough – even if you're charging top dollar. "The sad thing?" says Gaby Noble. "These small studios that have fully comp [comprehensively, classically] trained teachers, they cannot compete with the large gym chains [for cheap classes and rock bottom introductory offers]."

I ask Noble what she thinks will happen next with Pilates, with the boom and the dilution of the practice, the injuries, law suits and so on. She says Pilates is clearly in need of regulation, definitions, codes of practice, enforceable teaching guidelines. "Lesley McPherson at the Pilates Teacher Association has been working for it for years." But, Noble thinks, things will settle once the boom has passed – which it must.

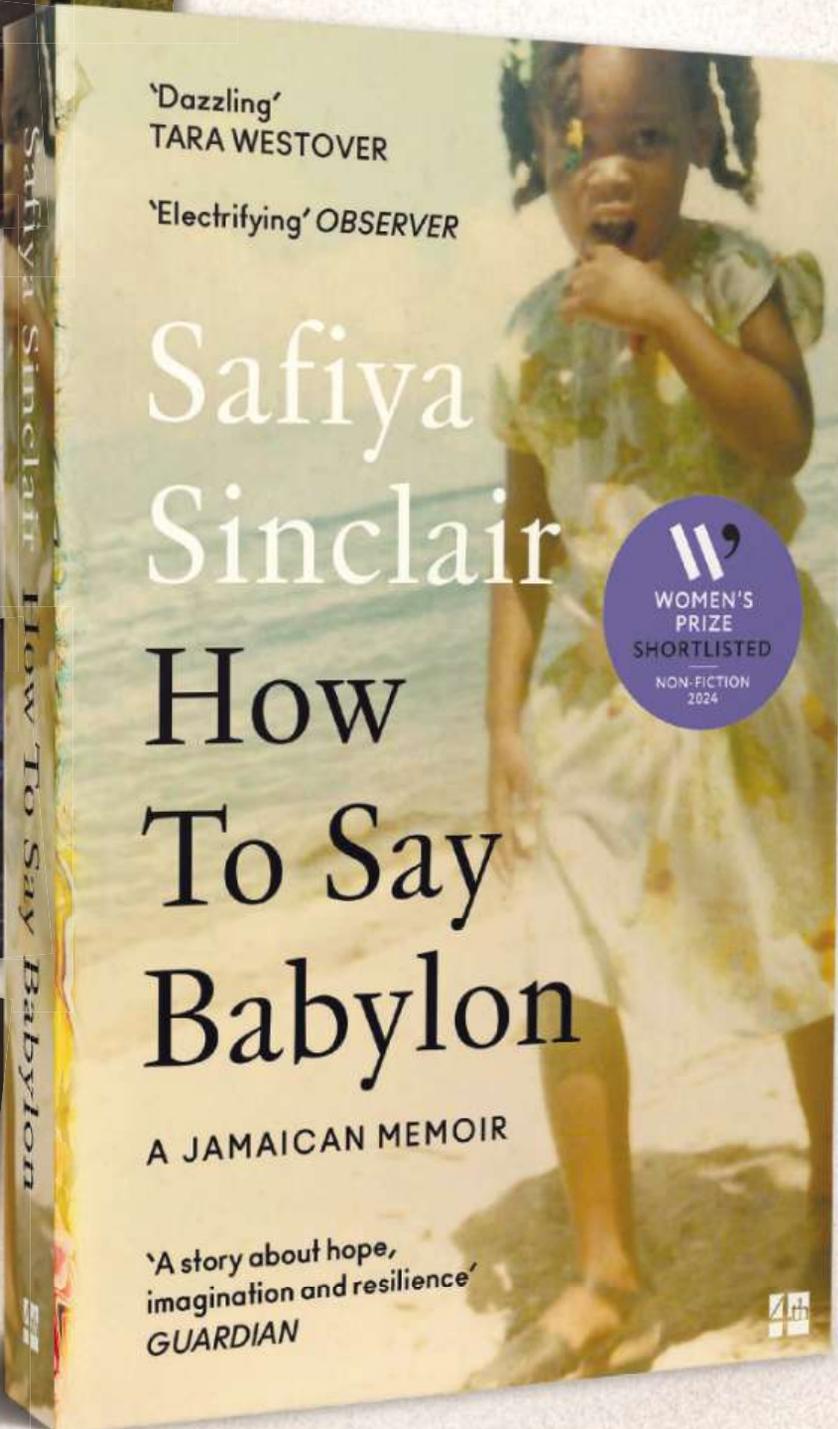
"It's happening already. It's all been reformer, reformer; now it's all about the Tower [another piece of Pilates machinery, also developed by Joseph]. There's mat, there's reformer, there's Tower, there's Wunda Chair, Magic Circle... I think the boom will cycle through all the equipment, then drop off. I'm 44, I've seen a lot of trends come and go."

Is she looking forward to this one going? "It's not that I'm looking forward to it... I don't like the injuries, though."

Which is very magnanimous of her. Me? I can't wait for the Pilates boom to die. Maybe because I'm a purist snob who seeks to gatekeep the niche fitness kingdom where I frolic, bend and plank four times a week. Or maybe because I think Pilates is too precious and good a thing to be turned into a flawed Instagram performance that can hurt people when it was purposely designed to do quite the opposite: to heal them. ■

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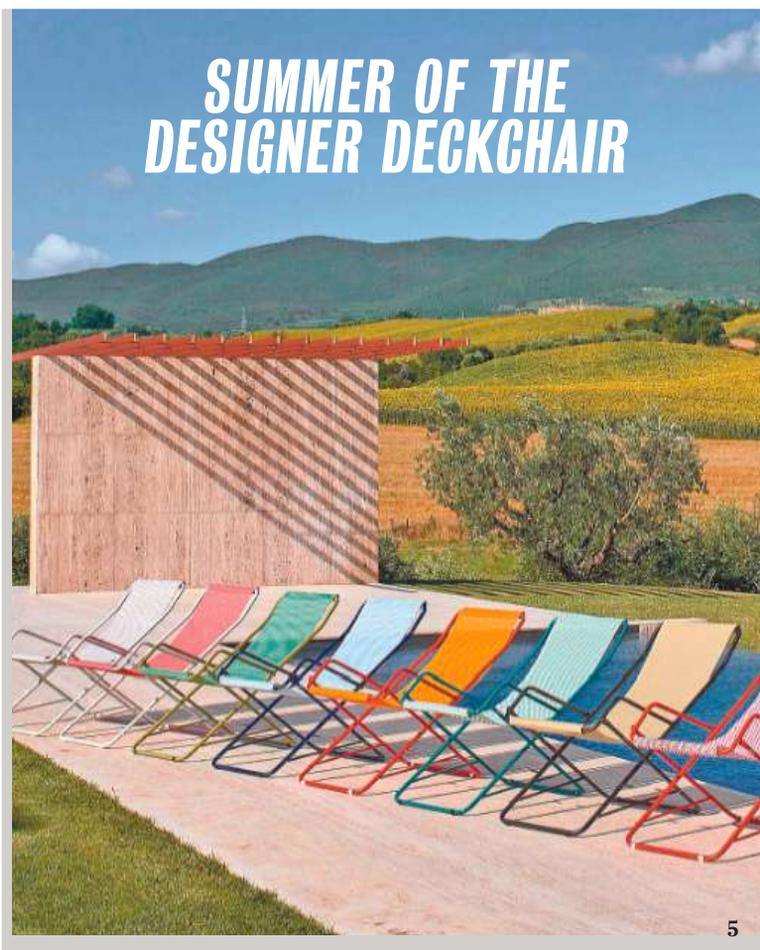
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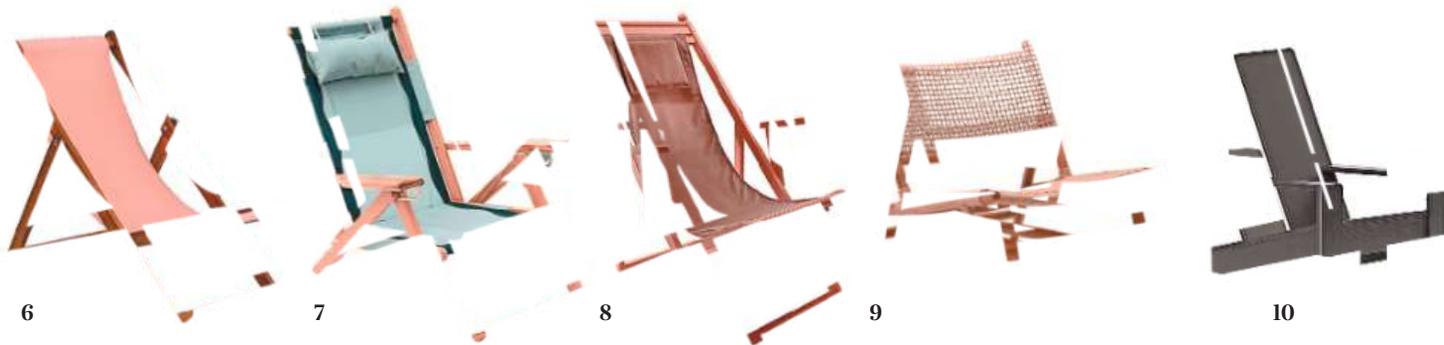
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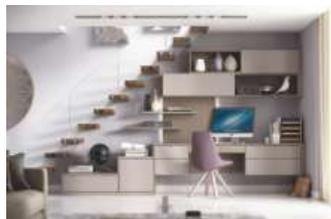


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Beta male

Robert Crampton

I feel young. I'm at a Springsteen concert. It's like a gig in an old people's home – and I love it'



DAN KENNEDY

I've discovered the secret to feeling young all over again: go to a Bruce Springsteen concert! At Wembley last Thursday, I knock off two decades in the space of three hours. Not just because Bruce remains the consummate showman and his gigs are always great fun, but because many if not most of the other 90,000 people in the audience are older than me. And I turn 60 a week today.

To be fair, the mosh pit has a lot of youngsters, some of them not even 40. But where I sit with my wife, it's like being at the theatre. A theatre in an old people's home. I was 20 when *Born in the USA* came out in 1984. I'm guessing most of my neighbours were already married with kids.

The Tube to Wembley is bursting at the seams with portly chaps in faded tour T-shirts – "'Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run," is stretched so tight over one stomach so generous that any such rapid unassisted forward motion must have occurred far, far back in that particular proud tramp's past. I count six greying ponytails in our carriage, not including my own, cos I live in hipster Hackney and mine's more of a topknot, right?

On Wembley Way, Nicola and I find a quiet corner while I fish out my specs and phone and swipe up Ticketmaster. Proudly, keen to show I am embracing what I still call "new tech", I navigate the prompts to where, when I'd checked two hours previously, our dynamic QR doo-be-doo code had been displayed.

Nothing. Blank. Disappeared. "I said you should have printed them." "The youngsters at the office said I didn't need to." "It's always worth having a back-up." "They were there at 4 o'clock. I saw them." And so forth, all the way to the turnstiles. I overhear another couple having the same argument.

At the entrance I befriend Shoab, a security guard who looks about 14, hand over my phone and throw myself on his mercy. A blur of Shoab's fingers and, hey presto, our tickets pop up. Effusive thanks. "No problem."

I catch Shoab rolling his eyes at his mate: "Another silly old fool."

Shoab doesn't actually say that out loud, btw. He doesn't need to.

We join a queue of our peers, many fumbling and failing to present their mobiles to an automatic scanner. It's like the queue at immigration when everybody over 55 cocks up the passport reader and has to summon help. Other couples are

forlornly unfolding printed paper tickets, discovering they don't work, getting into hissy domestics. "I told you, Peter..." etc.

Inside, many of the hardy souls with standing tickets are enjoying a nice final sitdown on the pitch before the Boss embarks on his legendarily lengthy set. A man with "Senior Safety Steward" on his hi-viz walks past. "You could read that either way," Nicola says. Good one, I tell her.

Bruce, preceded by his faithful E Street Band, takes the stage promptly at 7.15pm. "Oh my goodness," a man says behind me, "they're all old men, just like us."

An especially elderly gentleman, his knees evidently shot, gingerly takes his seat in front of me. He will spend most of the next three hours wisely seated, but for *Born to Run*, *Dancing in the Dark* and other bangers in the encore he will lever himself upright, or almost upright, and throw some creaky, agonised shapes. Nicola shoots me an anxious glance. "If he falls backwards," I shout in her ear, "I'll catch him. If he goes face down, he's on his own."

Throughout the evening, a posse of paramedics, first aid kits strapped to their backpacks, hurries to and fro as various medical emergencies develop. Talk about a double-edged sword: you score a free ticket to Springsteen, but it's your busiest night of the year.

A pal of mine told me later he'd taken his lad, aged 20, to see the Stones a couple of years ago. "I gave him the big build-up about how Mick and Keith appealed to all ages. First thing we saw was a fan in a wheelchair with an oxygen cylinder."

When it starts to rain about half an hour in, the whole of Wembley ignores it. I feel proud to be British. As the rain gets heavier ten minutes later, tens of thousands of those exposed to the elements rise as one and wrestle into their cagoules. I feel even prouder to be British.

Shuffling back to the Tube, the rain passed over, the crowd is good-humoured about the delays staged to avoid overloading the station. One daring chap puffs on a vape. When someone coughs, he meekly stows it back in his anorak. "I hope this doesn't take much longer," an old boy says to his middle-aged son. "It's an hour past my bedtime already."

"And I need a wee," he announces, a full minute later.

A gentle murmur of assent sweeps the throng. ■

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Ten-Night Mediterranean Overture

WINES OF SPAIN, FRANCE & ITALY WITH WILL LYONS

 **Departure | July 31, 2025**



Enjoy learning about regional wines via engaging talks and a tasting with The Sunday Times award-winning wine columnist Will Lyons, as you sail from Barcelona to visit stunning destinations in Spain, France and Italy on this ultra-luxury cruise.

Board the all-inclusive, ultra-luxury Seabourn Ovation in Barcelona to discover the historic cities, cultures and vintages of Spain's sunny Balearic Islands, Menorca and Mallorca. Head for the French Riviera and the fishing port of Sete, gateway to Montpellier and the walled city of Carcassonne. Then Toulon, and the chance to explore Provence, with incredible wine-tasting opportunities. Enjoy a day in Monte Carlo, or head further afield to nearby Nice or the artist colony of St Paul de Venice. The stunning Italian Riviera features the picture-perfect towns of Portofino and the Cinque Terre. Finally enjoy the idyllic islands of Corsica and Sardinia before ending your adventure in Rome's port of Civitavecchia.

Luxuriate in gourmet cuisine, all-suite comfort and attentive service as you travel in unique Seabourn style between your fascinating destinations. Learn about local wines with The Sunday Times wine expert and columnist Will Lyons, as you enjoy days at sea and exploring ashore, a private Sunday Times readers only reception, wine tasting and Q&A session with Will onboard.

WHAT'S INCLUDED ON YOUR SEABOURN CRUISE*

- ✓ Ten-night cruise onboard the intimate, all-suite Seabourn Ovation
- ✓ Return economy class flights UK to Barcelona and Rome to UK (London and select regional airports) with transfers airport/ship/airport
- ✓ Accommodation in a spacious veranda suite
- ✓ World-class dining and culinary experiences
- ✓ Welcome champagne and complimentary in-suite bar
- ✓ Complimentary premium spirits and fine wines
- ✓ Intuitive, personalised service
- ✓ Complimentary Wi-Fi
- ✓ Exclusive events for readers of The Sunday Times with Will Lyons, including a private drinks reception, Q&A and wine tasting event



Award-winning wine expert Will Lyons



Seabourn Ovation



Cala Luna Sardinia

TEN NIGHTS FROM*

- VERANDA SUITE (V1) - £4,679 PP
- VERANDA SUITE (V2) - £4,759 PP
- VERANDA SUITE (V3) - £5,089 PP
- VERANDA SUITE (V4) - £5,169 PP
- PENTHOUSE SUITE (PH) - £8,449 PP

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seabourn-will-lyons

QUOTE TIMES*

*Featured prices are per guest based on double occupancy and are inclusive of Cruise Fare, Taxes, Fees & Port Expenses. Please ask for sole occupancy fares. Fares are in Pounds Sterling. Inclusive economy air is provided from London (and select regional airports) to Barcelona on July 31, 2025 and between Rome and London (plus select regional airports) on Sunday August 10, 2025. Inclusive Air is subject to availability, valid only for guests residing in the UK and applicable to the first and second guests sharing a Suite only. In the event that promotional ECA is not available (at the sole discretion of Seabourn), or for guests not wishing to utilize the promotional air offer, a cruise credit will be applied to the booking amount. Promotional Inclusive Business Class Air (BCA) may also be available for an additional charge. Inclusive Air offers include complimentary transfers between the airport and ship and in case of an airline delay or cancellation when enroute, next port protection. If promotional air flight(s) and/or cruise schedule(s) force an overnight, a complimentary hotel night is also included. Inclusive ECA offer is based on promo code JE. Inclusive BCA offer is based on promo code JB. All events and cruise itinerary described here are subject to availability, operational viability and may change. All savings amounts are included in the fares shown. All offers are capacity controlled and may be modified or withdrawn at any time without prior notice. Other restrictions may apply. Seabourn reserves the right to correct errors. Ships' registry: Bahamas. ©2024 Seabourn.

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including all your M&S favourites



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