

Swing low: MovNat uses nature in place of fitness equipment

FITNESS

Getting fit, caveman style

The best way to overcome the many ailments that accompany today's sedentary lifestyles is to dial the clock back to prehistoric times and get back to nature's basics

Text & photos by **Tate Zandstra**

The world is a watercolour of indistinct blues and greens, my heart hammering from a brief but intense swim. Saltwater stings my eyes – I didn't grab enough air before diving. I can see Vic beneath me, sinking. I kick harder, my lungs burning, the water pressure pushing daggers into my ears. I reach him and lunge for the surface. Kicking back to the boat, I keep his neck locked firmly in my elbow as he taught me. "Remember to calm your breathing, as we spoke about on the boat," he whispers. You can't rescue a drowning man if you yourself cannot breathe – just one of many practical yet prehistoric lessons I'm about to learn.

"Some former human species were stronger than we are today; stronger than the strongest athletes," says Erwan, back on the beach. "When you're a kid, you're always told: 'Don't yell, don't move.' Whenever we have this primal exuberance, this expression of energy that we have in ourselves, it's repressed to the point that it's suppressed – you have to stand right, be polite, be silent, then you're a good kid." He speaks with passion. "You're not supposed to be a good animal; you're not supposed to be powerful. We become civilised, domesticated and I believe that makes us weaker." I, along with half a dozen Europeans, Americans and an Australian, have come to the island of Koh Lanta in Thailand's Andaman Sea to experience MovNat – a unique approach to fitness based on the lifestyles of our cave-dwelling ancestors.

According to the creator of MovNat, launched in 2008 and based on the historic French 'Methode Naturelle', modern mankind has evolved into 'zoo humans' – dangerously detached from our natural world. As a result, so the philosophy goes, we suffer physically, mentally and spiritually. Like animals born in captivity, we must be rehabilitated before we can 'get back to natural living' and be 'strong, healthy, happy and free,' but what exactly does that mean?

For founder Erwan Le Corre and instructor Vic Verdier, a former member of the French Special Forces, it means examining our contrived, orderly world and how we fit into it – not as the humans we think of ourselves as, but as the human-animals we really are. "You don't see stiff animals in nature; they are all flexible, they all can move," Vic says after a tough work-out involving running, carrying rocks and then crawling underwater until your body begs for oxygen. "Some are very feline and we like that because they are so supple, so flexible in their movement" – the very essence of the wild, pre-zoo hominid.

On the first day, we were hauled out of our bungalows and set on an obstacle course. Sunlight was filtering through a jungle canopy vibrant with birdsong and equatorial blooms. Vic took our shoes away. I wanted coffee. For the next week there would be no coffee, Vic said. Neither would there be shoes. Vic paced, his face hard: "None of these funny little habits." >



So we lifted: logs, rocks, one another. Jumped on, off and over things. Threw stuff, walked and ran. Everything was filmed, because at the end of the week we would do it all again. The improvements were shocking. We were getting fit not by going to a hi-tech gym, but by going back to nature's basics. The central ideology is adaptation: re-mastering the motor skills – from running and jumping to swimming and defending – that originally made us one of the most adaptable species on the planet.

We begin one morning by dividing into pairs, then throwing and catching a small rock. "You don't throw kettlebells. You swing them... it is a closed kinetic chain," Vic lectures, instructing us to change angles, look away and start walking. "Throwing the rock trains the muscles to be more explosive." We select bigger rocks, our movement patterns becoming more complex. "The movement is adaptive and so it gets harder," Erwan explains. "When you throw to a partner, the angles change; the distance. A rock is not like a kettlebell with a nice handle so you can close your eyes, swing and know what to expect. Here you have to let go and catch. That requires a higher level of adaptation and therefore a higher level of alertness, responsiveness and accuracy."

A fitness plan is, however, only as good as the diet that accompanies it. We made a bad turn, Erwan and Vic believe, during the agricultural revolution. Before that, humans were hunter-gatherers. We evolved over epochs to eat only what we could find or catch. Our bodies were fine-tuned to perform on such a diet, but the recent advent of sedentary life has perverted our nature. That's why so many suffer health problems: glutinous grains aren't good for us because our bodies haven't had time to adapt. Because of this, the course is paired with the Paleo Solution, a diet that eradicates gluten intake in favour of food more typical of hunter-gatherers.

The advent of agriculture allowed a few to produce food for many, freeing others to develop science, governance and religion – everything defined as human society over the last 10,000 years or so.

"It's easy to emulate the healthy diet and lifestyle of our Paleolithic ancestors," says Paleo Solution creator Robb Wolf on his website. "With a very simple shift we not only remove the foods that are at odds with our health (grains, legumes, and dairy), but we also increase our intake of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants."

"What is the difference between the wolf and the dog?" Vic asks me, before answering his own question: "The domestication process." I look around at the thick foliage, the roaring waterfall. This is our gym. We came here barefoot, running through the jungle like characters from a Caucasian Apocalypso.

"Throwing the rock trains the muscles to be more explosive"

Vic Verdier

"It's a good analogy because all dogs come from wolves – even Chihuahuas – and some people have become Chihuahuas," says Erwan, letting go of the huge log he'd been hauling around. "I don't know about you, but I don't like Chihuahuas. I think human Chihuahuas need rehabilitation."

Whether I'm one of these human Chihuahuas, I'm not entirely sure. What I do know, however, is that at the end of the week, bruised and sore though I was, I felt good. After a day of recovery, I felt stronger than I had previously and my body fat had dropped to around 5%. MovNat opened my mind to new ways of becoming strong and fit, especially while travelling, but can it replace the gym? Not necessarily, at least for me. Even for Erwan, who is openly critical of the linear movements of modern fitness equipment, a traditional gym can still offer a good workout: "I just climb over the machines, under them, naturally move around them..." ■



Jungle gym: MovNat founder Erwan Le Corre (above) demonstrates how the natural world around us provides the perfect environment in which to hone the human body; MovNat instructor Vic Verdier (below) and the art of 'no-nonsense' training

