

How a Spanish 'brain boot camp' eased the trauma of my bike crash



Trish Andres keeps her calm under the watchful eye of Dr Ribeiro Credit:

[Trisha Andres](#), Commissioning Editor, Travel
23 October 2017 • 4:37pm

Two polar bear cubs, Miki and Luca, dug their way out of the snow den they'd been hiding in throughout the winter on the Svalbard islands. As their little heads and bodies emerged from underground, they slid inexpertly down the snow-covered hill in search of their mother.

“Erm, do I need to do anything?” I asked, as I tried to keep my eyes glued to the full-sized cinema screen that was showing an episode of *Planet Earth Live*. I checked that the headband strapped around my head was securely fastened, and fiddled with the monitor clipped to my left ear. David Attenborough's soothing voice echoed in the background.

“No, you're doing very well,” replied neuroscientist Dr Bruno Ribeiro do Couto. He chose the nature film in order to detect changes in a patient's brain waves during a stressful scene.

If the patient was troubled, the film stopped. If, however, the patient was in a relaxed state of mind, the movie continued playing.

This was the first in a series of five neuro-feedback sessions I had scheduled with Dr Ribeiro, a trained clinical psychologist.



Trisha was in Alicante to restore her confidence in cycling Credit: SOLARPIX.COM/APS

I was at SHA Wellness Clinic, in Alicante on Spain's Costa Blanca, for a boot camp for the mind.

Boot camps have typically focused on the body. But in the past few years, as mental-health issues have come to the forefront of public awareness, the mind has become the focus at many retreat programmes. Medispas, for example, have recently started offering treatments that relate to mental health, from improving one's memory to reducing one's distress around a traumatic event. I was here to address the latter.

Four months ago, on a charity bike ride from Basel to Como, I'd fallen and sustained fractures. Following two weeks in hospital and another two weeks on crutches, my body recovered fully as if nothing had happened. However, I felt anxious about getting back in the saddle. Cycling is one of my favourite holiday activities, so I was keen to eliminate any negative feelings around it. Dr Ribeiro, who heads the clinic's cognitive development unit, claimed that he could help.

We walked back to his office where he gave me a series of tests on a computer. They weren't dissimilar to memory and IQ tests, assessing everything from attention span and concentration to working memory and one's ability to learn new things. One test, for instance, required memorising a series of numbers and clicking on the touch screen if I saw a repeat series, while another involved working out the next item in a sequence of shapes.

"Interesting," he said. "You've scored between 95 and 100 per cent better than your peer group in all the tests, barring one. That doesn't make any sense, as they're all interrelated. You're either tired, stressed or distressed, which is why you didn't do too well on the last," he explained. "Come," he beckoned me back to the cinema room. I sat down on one of the chairs. "Remove your shoes, please, and put both feet on the ground," instructed Dr Ribeiro. "Now cover your right eye with your right hand. Then look at me and recount the cycling accident."

I did and, to my utter surprise,

I started crying. I hadn't expected to at all. "Now, tell me the story again, this time covering your left eye with your left hand," he said. Dr Ribeiro then asked me to re-tell the incident, this time with both eyes open. I was still crying, but with less intensity. He had used a simple form of bilateral stimulation, a psychotherapy technique used to desensitise or decrease the emotional intensity around an event.



There are worse places to get back on the bike Credit: Fotolia/AP

"You don't have any trauma around cycling. We can go out now and get on a bike and I can assure you, you'll be absolutely fine," he concluded.

"Oh, OK." I was confused. "What you're really distressed about is the memory of feeling scared on your first night alone in A&E – and after all these years of being in control, discovering that you're vulnerable and that you can't control everything."

He looked at me kindly.

I tried to keep it together.

"The good thing is, we can teach you techniques to help calm your mind," Dr Ribeiro said as he uploaded another programme and once more strapped the headband around my temples. This time, a silver disco ball appeared on the cinema screen.

"Concentrate on the ball. If you're relaxed, it will float. If you're tense, it will stay where it is." A few seconds later, the ball was floating and stayed mid-air for another 15 minutes. "Mindfulness is a great way to boost your beta waves and helps increase mental clarity. You have the second highest float time score on the programme, so you obviously have a natural ability to relax. When you're stressed or distressed, you know how to calm your mind. Use that strength."

I had just come back from a stress-management session followed by a meditation class where I had to stare at a candle flame for a full hour, but Dr Ribeiro didn't need to know that.

Taking advantage of my Zen state, I was now ready to tackle the streets of Albir, where the clinic is located.

I hopped on a bike and pedalled up and down the hilly street studded with villas past Altea Bay and the Parque Natural de la Serra Gelada. I clocked a total of five miles, a far cry from the 100-mile-a-day rides I was used to.

But it was a start. Like Planet Earth's polar bear cubs, I was finding my feet.

Need to know

Wellbeing Escapes (020 3735 7555; wellbeingescapes.com) offers a seven-night stress-management programme at SHA Wellness Clinic from £4,148 per person for double occupancy or £4,877 for single occupancy. Prices are based on a November departure and include flights.