

Find your inner Williams sister

Can a tennis boot camp transform Janet Street-Porter's rusty forehand?

My love affair with tennis started when (as a lanky 6ft teenager) I managed to make the school team. I probably unnerved my opponents rather than impressed them with my ground strokes. Since then, my secret ambition has been to be a crack player – and it's been a lifelong project.

Most holidays, I try to find a court and a teacher, and usually end up pulling a muscle after putting my ageing body through hours of intense coaching. From Los Angeles and the Florida Keys to Sardinia and Bermuda, long-suffering tennis coaches have tried (and usually failed) to knock the erratic JSP game into shape. In my mind, I'm Venus Williams with dyed red hair. In reality, I look more like Rod Hull's Emu having a fit.

This year my annual tennis boot camp was at Curtain Bluff in the south of the island of Antigua. The coaches are locals who have worked their way up from starting out as ballboys in the annual Curtain Bluff tournament (which is supported by professionals such as Fred Stolle and Kathy Rinaldi) to full-time teaching. Each day I'd wake to a pink soft light and the sound of the waves, do a bit of stretching on the beach and stroll over to the courts for a 7.30 start, before the sun was too intense.

Head coach Dillo wasn't fazed by my rusty game (it's been a year since I last played, having spent the winter plagued with knee problems) and my creaking joints soon loosened up in the heat. Dillo diagnosed my problem as "too much chipping and chopping" – you might think that's a result of spending too much time in a television kitchen filming *The F Word* with Gordon Ramsay – but he meant my horrible forehand.

It's so easy to get despondent when your game is rubbish. I had to mind my language (too much time with Gordon) as in Antigua people don't swear. After an hour things were running much more smoothly, with only the odd naughty chip or chop. I rewarded myself with a slice of home-made

banana bread at breakfast.

Later that afternoon I had another tennis lesson, this time with Nigel, who talked me through his three steps to hitting the ball correctly. He gave me a top tip – move your racket back at exactly the same speed as the ball. It was bloody hot, and I must have sweated off the couple of glasses of rosé I sneaked in at lunchtime with my grilled tuna.

Next day I was surprisingly ache-free. Nigel said he's used to working with "challenging teenagers" when he teaches tennis at summer camp in Maine, so he had all the right tactics for me. Soon we were rallying. It went well as long as I didn't get overconfident and rush the net in which case he'd whack a ball past me and I was straight back in my place.

That afternoon I braved the humidity (it must have been in the eighties) for a lesson with Rennie, the senior coach. We concentrated on baseline work, and after 45 minutes of intense exercise I was the colour of a boiled lobster and soaked

through. Back in my room I covered my face in ice and sprawled on the sofa, trying to swig a beer whilst horizontal.

But as the week progressed, the horrible bags under my eyes faded away, my tan progressed nicely, my forehand and my backhand were gradually reconstructed, and I managed to serve several games without a double fault, much to Nigel's astonishment. My hair dye faded slightly in the sun but I arrived back tanned and ready for court action. I just need to remember not to chip or chop.



● Curtain Bluff Hotel, Antigua. From £2,685 per person via Elegant Resorts
● Stay seven nights for the price of six. Price is based on two adults sharing a Deluxe Room on an all-inclusive basis and economy flights from London Gatwick with British Airways including private car transfers. Based on July 24 departure
● For further information, please contact Elegant Resorts Reservations (01244 897515 or visit elegantresorts.co.uk)