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AFTERNOON
OF THE
LIVING DEAD

Ellie Ross tries out **Zombie S.W.A.T.**
training and lives to tell the tale





ELLIE AT ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE LONDON. PHOTO: VICTOR FRANKOWSKI

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ready for
our final
challenge:
zombie battle.
Armed with
a laser gun, I work with fellow
recruits, shooting the zombies into a
room where, the story goes, they will
be incinerated and destroyed forever.
Excellent news.
As I change back into my regular clothes, I can't help
smiling, adrenaline still pulsing through my veins. So if there's ever a real zombie apocalypse
and the world needs saving, turns out I'm your girl.

As I raise my gun, a creature with half its face missing emerges from the darkness and lurches towards me, letting out a blood-curdling scream. I take aim and pull the trigger. Bang. Another zombie is down.

I'm in an underground fort, fighting and shooting my way through blood-spattered demons in a bid to save the world. Sound a little far-fetched? Not at Bunker 51 in north Greenwich, where I am one of 19 'recruits' who have enrolled in Zombie S.W.A.T. training.

The three-hour session mixes shooting games with a scare attraction and tells a story along the way. Part-theatre, part-workout part-nightmare. zombie role-play events are becoming more and more common across the country, but few are as immersive and intense as this. As well as paintball, airsoft and laser tag, there is also a military-style assault course — and plenty of running from zombies. As the disclaimer forms we sign remind us, this event is 'not suitable for those of a nervous disposition'.

This is where the story begins. We are greeted by an eccentric German doctor wearing a white lab coat and a fierce sergeant, with bad language and a scar around his eye. The doctor explains that he is working on an antidote, while the sergeant barks: 'Are you ready to take down some f***ing zombies?'

Although I know they are actors — the event uses 12 of them to play military, doctor and zombie roles — it's easy to get swept up in the scenario. After five minutes, my group — which includes a young couple, group of lads and a father and son — are shouting, 'Yes sir!' to the sergeant. Some are even pumping fists.

But before we are ready to battle the undead, we need weapon training. Marshals — dressed in army uniform — are on site at



'ZOMBIES CAN'T SEE YOU IN THE DARK, BUT THEY CAN HEAR AND SMELL YOU. SHUT YOUR MOUTHS AND DON'T FART.'

all times to help if a gun jams or if, like me, you can't figure out how to take it off safely. Wearing a full face mask, I grapple with my airsoft rifle at target practice, sending the pellets spraying

everywhere apart from the zombie image I am aiming for.

Maybe I'll be better at paintball, I think, trailing behind the rest of my group as we enter the next area, a damp room filled with wooden crates and concrete walls. Now split into two teams, the aim is to shoot at each other until one side has no more players.

I spend most of the game cowering behind one of those handy walls, heart in mouth, as my teammates valiantly charge and shoot at our enemy. Keen to redeem myself, I volunteer for the next task just as we are plunged into darkness. The power has cut out, the sergeant says and one of us needs to lead the way through a pitch-black pit of zombies towards the generator.

'But you must be silent,' he whispers. 'Zombies can't see you in the dark, but they can hear and smell you. Shut your mouths and don't fart.'

With the chain of recruits behind me, I tiptoe into the darkness, feeling my body tense as I spot spooky silhouettes lumbering ahead. A few heart-stopping minutes later and I've done it — we have dodged the corpses, the power is back on and we are



IN THE SADDLE

Bike Polo swaps four legs for two wheels – and it's an exhilarating ride. *Nell Frizzell* plays her first game

It's 99 per cent confidence,' the man tells me, leaning against the chicken wire, his denim shorts ripped, tattoos across his giant forearms, a mallet swinging in his right hand. 'If you've got the bottle, get involved and persevere, then you can do it,' he adds, pushing off to join the scrum.

Hardcourt Bike Polo is, as the name suggests, a version of polo played on fixed gear bikes, on a hard court surface — the kind you often find in city parks — where the aim is to thwack a small, hard ball into a goal.

I felt a little intimidated, surrounded by these muscly, floodlit men. But I needn't have worried — a friendlier, more laid-back group of bike terrorists you'll never meet. The first trick was to get used to cycling one-handed while gripping a mallet like a tennis racket in my other hand. The second trick is staying on. Bike polo players rarely put a foot on the floor, relying on their brakes to stop and mallet to lean on.

Each game starts with a throw-in; all the mallets are tossed in the air and the six that land in the nearest clump get to play. Wisely, I sit out the first game, standing behind the goal with the others as they drink beer, burp and cheer on the players. 'Bike polo has a really strong DIY side, so it's been an amazing way to learn how to fix my bike,' says Fuschia, the woman standing beside me in perfect red lipstick and a checked shirt. 'I also think it's made me a better, safer cyclist.'

It's certainly a good way to learn about brakes, turns and using your peripheral vision. Not to mention building up some serious upper body strength, if the ache in my left shoulder is anything to go by. The games are short — usually lasting no more than about 15 minutes — but frenetic and exciting.

It's no wonder, then, that the sport is gaining momentum. Last year, London Hardcourt Bike Polo Association got its first purpose-built court, opening in the middle of the historic Herne Hill Velodrome.

The first game over, it's time for me to take to the wheels and have a go. I slowly roll the ball over the starting line, more like someone sweeping the floors of an airport than an adrenaline-fuelled sports junkie. Then suddenly the players are on me like a swarm of bees. My competitive instinct kicks in and I forget that I'm on a borrowed bike, that I'm not sure how to stop and that I don't know how to turn — all I want to do is to hit that ball past my opponents and into the goal.

One of the players pedals at me, his eyes fixed on the ball between my wheels and a screech, not unlike a bald eagle, suddenly erupts from our corner of the court. It's only a few seconds later that I realise the scream had come from me.

My heart racing and my feet still firmly on the pedals, I chase the ball up and down the court, turning as quickly as I can and even, occasionally, entering into the fray to try to steal the ball. I am definitely more hindrance than help to my team, who go to great efforts to pass me the ball, give me space and even congratulate my odd fumbled smack at the tarmac, but I'm having a great time.

'The next goal ends the game,' someone shouts from the sidelines. I once again roll the ball into the middle, push on a little further and then, somehow, through a heady combination of adrenaline, luck and the huge generosity of everyone on the court, I manage to hit the ball straight into the goal.

Another owl-like scream pierces the night. Only this time in triumph.



Nell was playing with the **London Hardcourt Bike Polo Association**. Beginners' games on Tuesday nights at Newington Gardens, SE1.

To book your own session visit: zombieapocalypselondon.co.uk