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Wellbeing holidays

Retreats are not a luxury – they are a necessity

Turns out we’re not just craving adventure – we want head space and healing, too. From Ireland to Ibiza and Barsham to Bali, Anna Hart finds the place for your ‘emotional detox’

Fifteen years ago, it would have been a brave banker, teacher or journalist who admitted they were heading off for a WildFitness bootcamp in Scotland, or a week of vinyasa yoga in Ibiza. We are British, and like to bang on about having a stiff upper lip, a lip inclined to slip into a sneer at anything that smacks of quackery, gimmickry or self-indulgence. But today it is entirely run-of-the-mill to dedicate our holiday time to physical wellbeing. What we are less comfortable with, however, is announcing that we are off on holiday to work on our emotions.

► Circle of trust: retreats have responded to the pandemic by catering more to our feelings

This is about to change. The biggest growth within the robust “wellness travel” sector is in retreats catering specifically to mental wellbeing, reducing stress and healing emotional trauma. Caroline Sylger Jones, founder of Queen Of Retreats (queenofretreats.com) has observed this rise. “The world needs retreating now more than ever,” she says. “We are right in the middle of a mental health pandemic, and as a consequence, we have seen a huge rise in retreats of a very high calibre that cater explicitly to psychological wellbeing, stress, emotional trauma and mental health in general.”

Every year, one in every five travel pounds is spent on a cleanse, yoga retreat, fitness bootcamp or other healthy holiday. And if a decade ago such options proliferated, primarily ministering to our physical bodies, today we are seeing the emergence of so-called “emotional detoxes” in retreat centres from Bali to Somerset and San Diego to Switzerland. The Covid crisis has brought the most radical shake-up of routines, priorities, social structures and lifestyles since the Second World War, and what we expect from a wellness-oriented break has changed forever.



Modern day wellness devotees are demanding a much greater emphasis on emotional restoration and psychological fitness – and, as the pandemic continues to disrupt our lives, this sort of trip will feel less like a luxury, and more of a necessity.

Chris Connors is a wellbeing coach and mentor, and founder of the guided meditation app OPO (opo.world). “We are in an unprecedented time where uncertainty and anxiety are testing our mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health on all levels,” he says. “But we also have unprecedented access to knowledge, understanding and practices that can restore our well-being, no matter what is thrown at us. ‘Wellbeing’ is no longer a passive, pampering fix-me-up, it’s an active choice to balance our perspective, build resilience, work on our self-awareness, regulate our emotions and support our physical strength.”

For better or worse, I am an early adopter and dedicated dabbler in most wellbeing trends. And although I still have a lot of unopened spirulina powder in my kitchen, I am a much more faithful devotee of transformational retreats. I’ve seen, and felt, lives change in the course of a week, with the right sort of expert attention.

Five years ago, when my ex-husband Sean and I were slowly and painfully parting ways, we both attended the Bridge, a grief processing and personal-awareness immersive course run by Donna Lancaster, who now runs an “online gym for the soul”, a six-month course called Deepening Into Life (deepeningintolife.com). “If you don’t share your story, you show your story,” is how Donna describes the value of grief-processing practices and retreats. “Honest sharing in a safe environment leads to healing.” Yet “honest sharing” about our past traumas isn’t as commonplace as it sounds. Even



with the best support network in the world (and I have one) there are some things we are just too socially attuned about to say aloud to friends and family.

Sean is a no-nonsense, bearded Shetlander who insisted on pronouncing the word “retreat” like an alarmed army commander, “retreaaaaat! retreaaaaat!”. But he returned from that week announcing he was transformed, ready to work on personal issues that irrevocably harmed our marriage – and ready to let me go. Sean and I are divorced and have a wonderful friendship today, which is one of my proudest achievements, and I completely credit Donna Lancaster with this. An emotional detox or transformational retreat does not come cheap, but neither does a bitter divorce. And I use the communication

and self-awareness skills she taught me every single day.

In the five years since I attended the Bridge, I have been curious about other retreats that explicitly cater to our psychological wellbeing. Lancaster’s previous experience was as a trainer for the Hoffman Process (hoffmaninstitute.co.uk), a seven-day residential retreat which works on the basis that an intense, immersive week is infinitely more effective and less time-consuming than years of traditional weekly therapy sessions. Hoffman alumni include the singer Katy Perry, the DJ Goldie and the psychologist Oliver James.

At any emotional detox, some guests arrive with specific traumas in mind: a painful divorce, redundancy, bereavement or some other transition. Others

feel that issues like burnout, stress and anxiety are impacting their professional and personal lives. Some feel “stuck” in destructive patterns, behaviours and habits, and they sense that their emotions are having a knock-on effect on their physical health, such as weight gain or digestive issues. We all have one thing in common: we are honest enough to accept that we need some help and support in order to live happier lives. Some of us feel desperate, some of us are impatient, some are simply curious. But we are all honest enough to admit that we need something more from our next holiday than a suntan and a hangover.

Right before the pandemic, I spent a week at the Place Retreat in Bali (theplaceretreats.com), run by the renowned psychotherapist Jean-Claude Chalmet.

◀ ‘At this point in time, so many people are in crisis’: Trish Whelan’s yoga retreats help people process trauma

“Having therapy is not selfish or weak, it’s a sign of bravery and self-awareness that should be celebrated,” he says. “In good therapy, you learn how to recognise your emotions and how to deal with them in a conscious and appropriate way. Unfortunately, many of us – particularly men and boys – are still being told that discussing feelings indicates some sort of weakness.”

Chalmet treats high-flying clients all around the globe and has built successful psychotherapy practices in both Greece and London, but he is particularly passionate about the sort of full-immersion and nurturing psychotherapy he can offer at a residential retreat – especially for men who struggle with the stigma attached to seeking help for mental health issues. “Of

course not all men need therapy. There are men who are emotionally developed, men who have an interest in growing emotionally by themselves, who become emotionally intuitive by observing and living life consciously or by reading self-help books,” says Chalmet. “That said, talking to a professional can uncover any blind spots. And if we had any issues simmering, it’s likely that the stress of this year has brought them to the boil. I tell my clients to look on therapy as being like a gym for the brain, as a workout for the most important ‘muscle’ in your body.”

And if you think that an “emotional detox” is a niche concept, some therapists are now designing retreats tackling a specific trauma, such as bereavement or a breakup. In 2021 counselling psy-

chologist and lecturer Alice Haddon founded the Heartbreak Hotel (theheartbreakhotel.co.uk) with resilience coach and speaker Ruth Field, described as “a radical new concept in transformational therapy run over a three-day luxury residential retreat”.

“We believe that heartbreak connects us to the essence of what it is to be human, and that our vulnerability is also the birthplace of compassionate change and daring creativity,” Haddon explains, making being heartbroken sound almost aspirational, a soothing idea in itself.

Their inaugural retreat in the summer of 2021, “Moving Beyond Betrayal”, focused on teaching women how to transform their anger into agency, make sense of pain, and identify one’s “love language” and attachment style. Parti-



► Get creative: nourish your soul with art while fasting at Buchinger Wilhelmi medi-spa

pants discover how to spot narcissists and infidels “so you can avoid them forever”, and learn how to meet your “core love needs”. Their three-day retreats now run on a monthly basis at Barsham Barns in Norfolk, led by a women-only team of psychologists, therapists and coaches. Personally, I am never keen on a strictly-gendered approach – and I break a lot of men’s hearts, so could send them some clients – but I adore the fierce honesty of this concept. And the fact that there is now somewhere a heartbroken woman of any age can go for dedicated care and support feels truly progressive.

How many of us have booked heart-break holidays hoping they would heal us, almost by accident? Emotional retreats acknowledge, isolate and target what needs to be healed. By comparison, the “emergency holidays” I took during my 20s seem like an archaic and scatter-gun approach to emotional recovery.

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sional experience affecting the body, mind and soul,” says Wilhelmi. “When the body is fasting, we nourish the soul with art, poetry, meditation and nature. The pandemic is a medical crisis, but it is also a psychological crisis.”

In October 2021, I went on my first retreat – and first international trip – since the start of the pandemic. Trish Whelan is a kundalini yoga instructor and speaker, and she has been running Soul Adventures (souladventures.co.uk) transformational retreats since 2013. On this retreat, I sat around in a circle with 12 men and women, who all shared their tales of trauma during the past two years. There had been breakups, career transitions, medical traumas, family rifts... all caused or compounded by the pandemic. And it felt like the greatest of luxuries to be in a room where we were all able to talk about how tough things have been – and then do something about it, gently guided through the trauma-releasing process by Whelan.

“This year, during the pandemic, I’ve seen a huge shift in how people view retreats, which is no longer as a luxury, but a necessity,” says Whelan. “So many people are in crisis, dealing with fear on a daily basis and overwhelmed with anxiety. There’s never been such an urgent requirement to learn how to regulate our emotions and resource ourselves.”

Before the pandemic, whenever I described my experiences at these “transformational retreats” to friends with raised eyebrows, I said: “They’re for travellers who don’t need rehab, but are self-aware enough to see they would benefit from dedicated counselling and support, perhaps after a bereavement, breakup, redundancy, burnout... or to kick lingering destructive patterns that hold us back.” Today, I feel I have a lot less explaining to do. The pandemic has put mental health front and centre, and as the Covid crisis continues to challenge our health and happiness, the definition of “wellness” has changed forever.

The Heartbreak Hotel is a shiny new concept within the emotional reset sector, but the pandemic has also prompted the grand dames of the retreat world to modify their retreats with a renewed focus on mental health. The original – and many say still the best – therapeutic fasting clinic, Buchinger Wilhelmi, is a no-nonsense medi-spa with a medical pedigree going back nearly 100 years. “We are a mixture between a private clinic, a hotel and a monastery,” says clinic director Leonard Wilhelmi. Fasting has been used as a fast-track to emotional lightness and spiritual wellbeing for centuries, but in recent decades the Buchinger, like the famous Mayr and Lanserhof clinics, have preferred to focus on the physical benefits. Until now. “We view fasting as a three-dimen-