



Escape the World

Leave modern life behind and find your bliss on a Balinese yoga retreat writes Natalie Bannister



We make our escape out of the hedonism of Kuta, travelling by car through bustling towns and up, up into the foothills of Ubud to another time, another place entirely different from the modern life we leave at home – our chosen destination is a special place that has no need nor room for any kind of harsh daily grind. This long, winding road is lined with rice fields and endless rows of shops stacked to the brim with stone carved buddhas, relief carvings of lotus and frangipani, the gods and deities holding our gaze as we pass by with speed. The view turns greener, the jungle beckoning beyond the horizon, and as we arrive at the gates of Kumara Sakti, I can feel all leftover tension ebb away softly, gently. This will be our home for the next week, where our spirits will make a retreat from the world for yoga, meditation, healing and health.

We have come to Kumara Sakti to experience the unique 'Escape the World' retreat hosted by our new friends, French Canadian spa and wellness innovator, Claude M. Chouinard and a truly amazing yoga/meditation teacher and mentor, Iyan Yaspriyana. This dynamic duo have tailored an exceptional program in their One World Retreats calendar that is designed for those who want to immerse themselves in gentle daily yoga and meditation, spa treatments, and cultural activities in luxurious surrounds. It's like the ultimate Balinese vacation for the body, mind and soul.

The retreat attracts a global assortment of visitors, from professionals needing time out from hectic lives, to those who are simply in search of inner peace. Far from just the exclusive domain of yogis and spiritualists, the retreat also hosts many couples who choose to incorporate this escape in to their own Balinese holiday itinerary, to re-connect with themselves and, in so doing, nurture their relationship together.

We are shown to our stunning room, set high overlooking terraced rice fields, surrounded by soaring, coconut-laden palm trees and the sound of the spectacular Ayung River running wild and free below to provide the perfect jungle soundtrack. I have one of those rare, hand-to-heart 'Wow!' moments as my gaze travels up to meet that view, that magical view that has brought famous artists and writers from around the globe to Ubud to find peace and serenity. Our own private balcony – complete with day chair and lounge and a dining table fit for two – leads us into the delights of our cool, airy bedroom, its oversized glass windows flooding the space with natural light and as much of that green, green view as one could please. It is all just so perfect, and thoroughly conducive to the relaxation and contemplation that we have come here for.

When all of the group has arrived and discovered their own rooms in paradise, we all meet at the open air yoga sala. There are 11 of us altogether, sitting here cross legged on our yoga mats facing each other in an intimate circle. It is dusk, and candlelight casts a golden glow across our faces. Claude and Iyan begin the introductions by explaining what we can expect from this escape – most of all, Claude says, this place is just for us, this moment is our own to discover more of ourselves and enjoy the benefits that such an escape can bring in to our own daily lives. We each take turns introducing ourselves and here, in this motley group, we find like-minded creatives and professionals, including two couples – one is an older couple from Spain with no prior yoga experience, and the other a young couple from Australia who bring with them a combined five years practice. And therein is one of the great things about this retreat – it is not about how skilled you are in yoga (beginners make up the majority of participants in this ongoing retreat), it is not about your age or your even about your spirituality. It is simply about the spirit. It is time to stop and say, 'this is all about me'. Everyone is equal here at Kumara Sakti.



Iyan leads us all in the first of what will become twice daily meditations, and we all float blissfully out of the sala and up the moss covered stone stairs to enjoy a lavish, delectable welcome feast at the communal dining room. Claude and Iyan make for delightful hosts, regaling us with tales of their travels and experiences of Balinese life and, during tea and dessert at the property's own palace (yes, some of Balinese royalty resides here on site, just to really affirm this as a special place!) they begin filling us in on the many Balinese rituals, some that will become a part of our stay here in Ubud.

As a place for couples, Kumara Sakti and the 'Escape the World' retreat has many benefits. Many of the couples who come here either begin or end their stay in Bali at the party and shopping centre of Kuta, cosmopolitan Seminyak or the surfing meccas of Nusa Lembongan or Uluwatu, meeting the divide between shopping, fine dining and water-based activities. It's a great way to have fun together as a couple, providing opportunities for each of you to indulge in your own preferred lifestyle passions. The week spent here doing this retreat, however, is an entirely different kind of experience – here it is all about focusing on the inner strength of the individual and the relationship together. And that can be a gift that will keep on giving back to you both when you return home.

Yoga in itself has so many benefits for our relationships in life, and in particular, when explored with our life partner, it can be a tonic to mutual love and attraction. When you take a yoga class together, you both know you are having the same experience, sharing the same union, connecting through the senses. You are both experiencing inner growth, going through your own inner journey yet sharing it together, next to each other. Connected yet still grounded in your individual self.

Yoga makes you more aware of how you interact with others. It makes you less quick to anger, more contemplative and compassionate, some would even say more passionate. It builds physical strength but, more than that, emotional strength, as it is a practice that requires observation, stamina and total presence in the now. This can be carried forth into your relationships, and in particular, your love. As you love yourself, you can more easily love each other more openly and honestly – translate this together in to your relationship, and you are on the path to a stronger, more stable union.

Iyan reminds us often during our retreat that a practice in both yoga and meditation is not about the destination but about the journey – it is about the steps you take along your path to finding self realisation, balance and grounding. As he says, we must affirm to ourselves that we do deserve a great life, and give thanks to our self for each step we take towards that. So, as you traverse this path, make the journey more pleasurable, engaged and alive.

Mornings are early but inspirational. Everyone rises at 6.30 am to the sound of a gentle chiming bell outside your door, and half an hour later the sound of a gong heralds the start of morning yoga at the sala. We begin with some mild meditation, and progress in to yoga asanas (or postures) that are soft on day one and build in difficulty as each participant strengthens and connects to their own bodies. Each asana is just challenging enough to give the beginners a push in to their practice whilst keeping the more experienced of us – myself and our Australian couple – literally on our toes! We all push past our own limits, and at times, find ourselves in some incredible positions.

The classes are informal enough to promote good times too. There is an evening partner yoga program that is a fantastic exercise for the couples involved who learn how to take their yoga practice into total physical harmony together. For this group, however, it is also a foray in to absolute hysterics as we all twist and turn each other and fall in heaps on the floor together, crying from laughter at the clumsiness and absurd stamina of us all. In the weeks after, once our retreat is over, we hear from Claude and Iyan that they have lovingly nicknamed our group the 'Laughing Group'!

After each of the twice daily yoga/meditation session, we leave the sala with loose limbs and a healthy appetite to enjoy a sumptuous and nutritious three course meal together before we all part our separate ways or join in on the retreat program of cultural activities. During the free days, some of the group will go in to Ubud town to do some shopping and sightseeing before returning to the retreat for lunch, while others (like us!) can't bear to tear ourselves away from the peace and quiet, choosing to instead escape to our rooms to enjoy the view, read a book, partake in one of the treatments offered on the spa menu, or swim in one of two tropical pools. As the sun begins to set, the sound of the gong calls us all back to the sala for our restorative evening practice before another gourmet three course dinner. And so it goes ... a daily program that nourishes the body, the appetite, the mind and the soul.

One of the highlights of the 'Escape the World' retreat is the purification ritual at Tirta Empul, carried out on our second evening, at one of Bali's most revered temples and home to a mystical spring that is thought to cleanse and purify any

who come to bathe in it with open hearts and offerings. We are all dressed in traditional temple attire – batik sarongs and white shirts, sashes for the ladies and traditional head dresses for the men. It is late evening when we arrive at the temple grounds and there is an eerie silence shrouding our stay here, surrounded by elegant and ornate temples and imposing stone statues looking down on us from the shadows. We are lead by Iyan through the first stone gateway in to the bathing pools, to a platform of stone steps where a local Pemangku (priest) awaits us. The purification ritual begins with a series of prayers before we are asked to enter the waters one at a time to say our own personal, silent prayers and immerse ourselves three times at each of the many flowing fountains. The water washes away our fears, our sorrows, our questions and our bad habits, cleansing our energy and, amazingly, we each emerge looking physically lighter, brighter ... dare we say it, purified?! The ritual ends at the next series of temple, where the priest leads us in more prayers with our offerings of flowers and incense. He sprinkles us with holy water and places rice kernels in our palms, to be gently put on our foreheads and the top of our chest to show that here, on the grounds of Tirta Empul, we have prayed. We sit there, silent, in single file, cross legged on the ground, humbled with this exceptional beginning to our holistic retreat.

Other activities during the retreat will bring us in closer contact with the local lifestyle and the best of culturally rich Ubud. There is an amazing sunrise yoga overlooking Mount Batur, with Mount Agung in the distance, both volcanoes that are still active and revered by the Balinese. There is a four hour leisurely cycle down through villages and beautiful countryside, where the only safety hazard



fact file

CLIMATE: You can expect pleasant day temperatures between 20°C to 33°C year-round. From December to March, the west monsoon can bring heavy showers and high humidity, but usually days are sunny and the rains start during the night and pass quickly. From June to September the humidity is low with little rain, and it can be quite cool in the evenings. In Ubud and the mountains expect cloudy skies and showers at any time throughout the year.

A GOOD IDEA: Bali has some of the best hotels and villas in the world, fabulous beaches and great shopping, restaurants and nightlife so make sure you leave time to enjoy another side of Bali before or after your yoga retreat.

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GETTING THERE: Garuda offer over 40 flights a week from Australia to Bali. Check with your local travel agent.



is the local children who run out of houses and compounds to wave at us and yell their favourite English words, in cascades of "hello" and bright smiles and a genuine excitement to see this trail of foreigners riding through their towns. We walk through traditional villages and along country tracks with Iyan who points out native plants and explains local customs and the complexities of rice cultivation. We trek along meandering paths through working farmland, past tiny artisan studios with our yoga assistant Wayan for our guide, stopping for lunch at the hidden treasure that is Sari Organik, a restaurant floating amongst a sea of green rice fields, where we enjoy a divine, totally organic feast and cold fresh juices accompanied by Iyan's hospitality and his delightfully infectious laugh. We gather together back on our yoga sala to learn how to make traditional Balinese temple offerings and we all laugh together at the clumsiness of our foreign fingers and the delicate skill of our smiling hosts' trained hands in weaving and joining strips of palm frond in to tiny baskets for our offered flowers. There are more sacred ceremonies we participate in, cleansing us emotionally, making more room in our lives to welcome in a new sense of happiness and health. We share every unique experience together as a group, as a couple, as a friend, and we keep these memories as treasures to take home with us.

There is even a day of silence in which we are encouraged to 'go within! As Claude explains to us on our first night here, silence can have a large impact on the self. They have incorporated this in to the retreat as an optional experience, taking its inspiration from the Balinese day of Nyepi, the one day each year when it is believed that 'evil spirits' visit the island and a national silence day is kept so that, when the spirits arrive, they will not find anything or anyone to invade. No planes will land in Bali on this day, no cars will drive and no lights will burn, and the Balinese disappear inside their homes to spend their day in meditation and prayer.

The spa treatments included in the 'Escape the World' retreat leave even the most tense of us totally, utterly, blissfully relaxed. Iyan is trained in Ayurvedic Chakra Dhara massage – a highly specialised healing therapy that consists of massage and dripping warm herbal oil on the chakra energy points of the body to balance and purify the body, mind and spirit. He has personally trained all of the therapists at Kumara Sakti in this incredible treatment – and he insists that each of them learn yoga and meditation skills in order to be a conductor of energy to the client. It is clear from the first moment of this two-and-a-half hour treatment that this is not just a physical indulgence, but a full spiritual experience. In addition to the Chakra Dhara, each of us is also offered a herbal massage treatment, so our week is punctuated with many heavenly journeys to the on site spa.

By the end of the six days, filled with amazing food, purified and cleansed by ceremony and tradition, softened by massage, long and lithe and strong in our body and mind from our yoga and meditation, and engaged in new-found friendships and self awareness, we take our turns to say farewell to each other and depart. Some of the group will go home now, others continue on to other parts of Bali for other kinds of holidays. We do not say goodbye to Kumara Sakti ... we all know each of us will be taking a piece of this very special place away with us in our hearts. And there is no doubt that many of this 'Laughing Group' will return here again, to this beautiful retreat, to discover some more Bali bliss.

Photography: Natalie Bannister