

RETREAT TO WELLNESS

The day after Jackie Randles resigned from a job, she woke at 4am with severe chest pain. Taking this as sign to make changes in her life, she embarked on a yoga retreat.

THE RUSH TO CASUALTY WAS A WAKE-UP CALL.

My body was telling me in no uncertain terms that it was time to make a change. I decided to kick-start my wellness regime by participating in a yoga retreat in Bali. Searching online, a five-day program called "Escape the World" caught my eye.

Each morning we're woken at 6.30am by the sound of a bell. Candles, flowers and incense create a soothing atmosphere in the yoga pavilion. The jungle at dawn is alive with bird calls and the chuckling of geckos. Squirrels scamper about in coconut trees, one diving head first into a banana bush. Dragon flies buzz in and out, humming gently above the gurgle of the fast-running river several metres below.

Our teacher Iyan begins the class with a guided meditation. On the first day my body aches as I try to sit up with a straight back. My breath won't flow. I keep wriggling, trying to get comfortable. My breath does not seem to descend any further than my throat. After what seems like an eternity, 10 minutes of meditation comes to a close. We continue to a series of yoga poses and I'm horrified by the stiffness in my body. It's with great relief that the class finally draws to a close and we fall into shivasana for total relaxation.

A few hours later I'm taken to the spa for my first treatment, a *mandi lulur*, or floral bath. From the moment I lie on the massage bed, my mind and body finally begin to relax. Strong, sweeping strokes banish any tension that had arisen during the morning yoga. The aromatic herbal massage works wonders.

Then comes the *lulur*. A paste of turmeric, rice flour and essential oils is applied to the body, allowed to dry, then rubbed off. Exfoliation complete, Ayu slaps on cold yoghurt then leads me to my bath — an enormous tub filled with flowers in a room that opens to a lush garden. "At last," I think, "I'm here."

During the evening restorative yoga session, I feel much more grounded. My breathing is no longer so shallow and something has shifted. That night, my personal transformation is taken a step further as we experience a Balinese purification cleansing ritual at Tirta Empul, one of Bali's most sacred water temples. It's a site of pilgrimage for people from all over the island who come to cleanse their bodies and souls in its spring waters.

An elaborate ritual beckons. First, we offer flowers and incense to a priest who chants musical prayers. Flowers of different colours are held in fingertips, washed in incense then placed behind our ears and on top of our heads. We then submerge ourselves in clear pools around the sacred fountains.

The Balinese believe that full-body immersion in the gushing cold fountains of Tirta Empul helps overcome all kinds of obstacles and protects good health. I can't help but laugh as I follow tradition and dunk my head three times under a line of gushing fountains. I express thanks and ask for the strength and insight I need to make positive changes in my life. It's great to so tangibly let go of negative experiences and charge myself with the purest joy and gratitude.

I'm exhausted when I reach my peaceful room with its orange walls. I sleep like a child, deeply and with a wonderful sense that exciting possibilities lie ahead.

Bali is the perfect place for this kind of retreat. A visual feast greets



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the eyes. Ancient, moss-covered stone carvings embellish low walls that are randomly punctuated by colourful flowers and temple offerings. Coconut trees sway in intensely green rice paddies.

Everywhere, prayer combines with daily life. Walking along, you come across dozens of small woven trays filled with flowers, rice and incense sticks (*canang*). These offerings to God adorn small temples, sit outside front doors, on stairways and even on car dashboards.

Every moment inspires awareness and appreciation, not only of the incredible beauty and spirituality at hand but also of one's own place in the world.

Over the week, I discover what it means to "experience the now" as my stiff and inflexible body softens into poses. After a few days I stop thinking about the past and even forget about the future for hours at a time. To my delight, I find myself discovering the joy of the present, somewhere I've rarely lingered.

One day we are invited to experience silence and think about things in our life we wish to let go. I compile two lists: one to burn on the last day and another to cherish. Next morning the bell sounds

at 4.30am and we travel to the volcano Mt Batur for a sunrise yoga session. Clouds still cover the majestic peak as we arrive. It's cold.

Still silent, we begin to slowly stretch our limbs and move into a sun salutation and other poses. By the time we finish, Mt Batur breaks through the clouds and is touched by sun. There's a lush green valley below.

A 22km downhill bike ride takes us on small roads through coffee and fruit plantations and rice paddies all the way back to Ubud. On the way we stop for walks through villages, meandering along tiny alleyways to admire small houses with grass roofs.

On the last day we make a Balinese offering that we fill with flowers. We then burn the list of things we wish to let go. I'm unprepared for the intensity of my reaction to this ceremony: tears stream down my face. It's a powerful experience to watch the basket float away down the river carrying away all my unwanted thoughts and attitudes. ☺

Escape the World is one of several retreat programs offered in Ubud Bali by One world retreats. W: www.oneworldretreats.com