

KINDRED
SPIRIT

RETREAT GUIDE

2025

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the best
retreats and
transformative
gatherings
worldwide



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For further information: info@overtherainbowwales.co.uk

Click to view on Zoopla

WELCOME...

I'm delighted to welcome you to this year's *Kindred Spirit Retreat Guide* – our curated collection of some of the most transformative spiritual retreats and gatherings.

For the first time ever, the Retreat Guide is available exclusively as a digital download, with free access to all. We're happy to say this means we're able to share an inspiring getaway to your next inner or outer journey, wherever you are.

Inside these pages, you'll find a vibrant mix of experiences – from yoga, meditation and wellness retreat highlights and conscious festivals to spotlights on Amsterdam, France and Iceland – all tailored for the spiritual seeker. Whether you're looking for rest or reconnection, healing or growth, we hope you find something here to meet you exactly where you are now.

We believe retreating isn't about escape – it's about returning to what matters most. So settle in and let this be your guide to reconnecting with yourself, the natural world, and a whole network of kindred souls this summer 2025 and beyond.

With warmth and blessings,

Leah Russell

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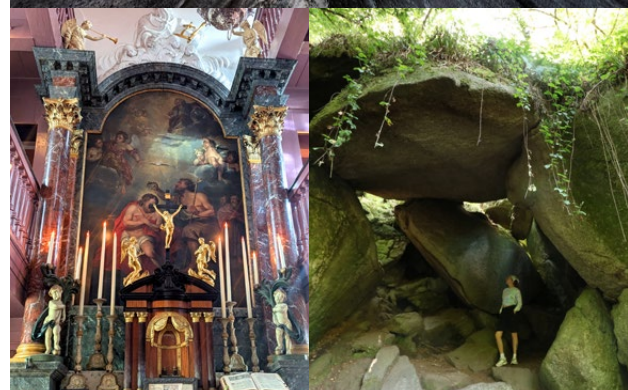
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What's New in the World of Retreats?

Dip into our round-up of the best retreat options to inspire your next getaway



CHOOSING THE RIGHT RETREAT

There are a few things to consider before booking yourself a retreat – go through our checklist to make sure you set yourself up for success

+ Ask yourself what you want from the experience:

Are you looking for rest, release or transformation? Is being part of a group retreat important to you, or are you seeking solitude? You could create an ‘intention journal’ before booking – include a page detailing what you’re leaving behind and a page for what you want to call in.

+ **Do your research:** Read reviews before booking to consider if it’s right for you. For example, some retreats will encourage you not to use your phone at all, while others will have more relaxed rules about digital connection. Check out the websites of specific retreat centres, and cross-check on a trusted website like TripAdvisor.

+ **Don’t ignore logistics:** Think about how far you’re willing and able to travel, as well as the retreat’s duration, factoring in any extra travel time. Consider affordability:

what’s included, and what might be an additional cost? Accessibility is also key. Does the space cater for your needs, like dietary requirements, physical mobility levels or any sensory sensitivities?

+ **Consider your energy levels:** Some retreats will place a firm focus on rest and relaxation, and others might involve more active learning or physical activities. Make sure you know what you’re signing up for to ensure you get as much as possible from the experience.

+ **Follow your intuition:** After running through your checklist, be sure to tune into your body’s ‘yes’. Even if your mind has some hesitations, you should follow your gut and trust that you know what’s best for yourself. Take as long as you need to meditate on things before jumping into your next adventure.

TOP DESTINATIONS

Get inspired by some of the hottest current destinations in wellness travel with these hand-picked locations

ICELAND

Full of outstanding natural beauty and geothermal energy, Iceland is the perfect destination for your next wellness retreat. With time in nature and wellness built into the everyday culture of Iceland, this is the location for your escape from everyday life to recharge and re-energise your mind, body and soul.

Where to stay: Book a stunning room with a private terrace at [The Retreat at the Blue Lagoon](#), enjoying access to the spa, yoga classes and skincare amenities for three nights from £4,083.

GREECE

As a country that really takes a holistic approach to wellness, Greece is the place to visit for the ultimate union between mind and body. With a diverse natural landscape, there is ample opportunity for the fresh air to sweep away tensions and stress and leave you feeling calm and restored.

Where to stay: Stay at [Angsana Corfu Resort and Spa](#), a double room with stunning sea views. Three nights (with breakfast) costs from £953.

MAURITIUS

Known for its world-class wellness facilities alongside crystal blue waters and white sandy beaches, the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean is the perfect destination for a touch of luxury. Breathe in the fresh coastal air and reconnect.

Where to stay: Stay at the [Shangri-La Le Touessrok](#) for breathtaking views, a wide variety of spa experiences and organic local ingredients for treatments. Book a three-night minimum stay for £1,459.



TRENDS TO TRY

From digital detoxing to sleep wellness, discover the latest retreat trends transforming the way we rest, heal and reconnect



DIGITAL DETOXING

In an era of constant access to our devices and connectivity, it's no wonder digital detoxing is gaining popularity. Focusing on disconnecting from our phones and promoting activities that are device-free, a digital

detox can be a gateway to feeling more present, and rejuvenated than ever before.

WHY NOT TRY...

IN THE UK: Book a stay with [Unplugged](#), a company focused on creating calming cabin spaces around the UK

that are off-grid but close to the city for easy access for a few days away. Locations range from Wales, Cornwall and the outskirts of London, with prices starting from around £400 for a minimum three-night stay.

AROUND THE WORLD: [Eremito](#) is a former Italian monastery in Umbria, ideal for solo travellers looking to get away from things. There's no WiFi, phone signal or tech – just basic rooms lit by candles. There is, however, a spa, healthy vegetarian meals included, and optional twice-daily meditation sessions. €270 per night for a two-night minimum stay.

IMMERSIVE NATURE EXPERIENCES

The use of nature in our wellbeing routines is still a key theme for 2025, but now we're looking to see how we can more deeply connect with the natural world. From forest bathing and off-grid offerings to wilderness therapy and eco-adventures, we can reconnect with our surroundings to bring increased mental clarity and reduce stress levels.

WHY NOT TRY...

IN THE UK: [Spirit Horse](#) is a summer off-grid retreat centre, with a village of Celtic roundhouses and yurts, waterfalls, sacred fires and temples cradled in 200 acres of Welsh forest. Enjoy the gathering of a community of tribal

ways, where the ancient soul has a seat by the fire. Retreats range in price, so check specific retreats accordingly.



AROUND THE WORLD: [Aro Hā](#) is an off-grid and eco-friendly space focusing on rejuvenation through yoga, hiking and plant-based foods in the Southern Alps of New Zealand. Their Revive & Thrive retreat is a six- to seven-day programme where you'll deepen your breath, nourish your immune system and calm the nervous system. Prices start from \$6,950.00 NZD.



SLEEP WELLNESS

We're seeing a big shift in how we view sleep, embracing a more holistic, personalised and tech-integrated approach. Look to address any underlying blockages that may be standing in the way of getting a good

night's sleep with a holistically focused retreat.

WHY NOT TRY...

IN THE UK: [The Good Sleep Retreat](#) at Ockenden Manor Spa Hotel in East Sussex countryside puts its focus on

evidence-based sleep advice. It offers clinical expertise and a range of activities and experiences aimed at improving sleep. Dates are available from October and beyond, costing £999 for two days and three nights.

AROUND THE WORLD: [The Farm at San Benito](#) in the Philippines is a holistic health resort offering personalised mental wellness programmes, detoxing and sleep-focused therapies. With treatments focusing on finding the root of sleep problems and disturbances, you can take part with stays starting from around £250 for two people.

PEACEFUL PACKING

Use our checklist to mindfully prepare for a soul-nourishing experience.

- ✦ Lightweight, breathable layers in natural fabrics
- ✦ A journal and a pencil or pen
- ✦ Books that nourish the soul – fiction, non-fiction, or activity books are all perfect
- ✦ Eye mask, earplugs and travel blanket if travelling a longer distance
- ✦ A water bottle to keep hydrated on your travels

- ✦ If you will be attending rituals, ceremonies or sacred sites, bring respectful clothing that adheres to local standards
- ✦ You might also like to pack an envelope or pouch for keepsakes to help you remember and integrate your experience — you could include small notes, dried flowers, or other tokens from your journey

DID YOU KNOW?

64%

*of us in the UK are
dissatisfied with our sleep,
according to research
by Nuffield Health.*

Mindful Festivals & Soulful Gatherings

Here are some of our favourite festivals and conscious events to look out for, from this summer and beyond...

Retreats aren't the only way to rest, reset and reconnect. From woodland gatherings and wellbeing weekends to yoga festivals and sacred sound immersions, summer and autumn are bursting with soulful events that nourish from the inside out.

WORLD YOGA FESTIVAL

Henley-on-Thames, 31 July to 3 August

A four-day celebration that bridges retreat and festival, hosted at the Henley Showground beside the River Thames. The [World Yoga Festival](#) brings together daily yoga sessions from multiple lineages, pranayama, meditation, non-duality teachings, Ayurveda, chanting, kirtan, wisdom talks and evening concerts.

✦ **WHY GO?** Learn from revered masters in authentic traditions, enjoy vegetarian food, an inspiring world-market and healing stalls, without the burnout of larger festivals.

✦ **A four-day adult pass costs £250, but if you're quick, you can get a discounted ticket for £229.**



INTO THE WILD GATHERING

Sussex, 1 to 3 August 2025

[Into the Wild](#) is a heart-led festival that brings together sacred ceremony, movement, music and earth connection in a peaceful Sussex valley. Expect wild swimming, cacao circles, conscious dance, woodland sauna sessions and family-friendly activities.

✦ **WHY GO?** It's a gentle, intimate space that feels like a retreat with the heart of a festival.

✦ **£160 for a weekend ticket.**

MEDICINE FESTIVAL

Wasing Estate, Berkshire, 14 to 17 August 2025

Described as a 'gathering of people, music and wisdom', [Medicine Festival](#) brings together indigenous elders, artists, healers and changemakers in an alcohol-free, plant-centred weekend. Alongside live music and talks, expect sweat lodges, yoga, storytelling and earth-based teachings.

✦ **WHY GO?** For spiritual depth, cultural respect and regenerative action, all in a stunning lakeside setting.

✦ **Visit [medicinefestival.com](#) to join the waitlist for 2026.**

BUDDHAFIELD FESTIVAL

Somerset, 16 to 20 August 2025

Buddhfield is a UK-based collaboration of Buddhists involved with the Triratna Buddhist Community who run a year-round retreat schedule, as well as [this yearly festival](#) hosted in the heart of Somerset. Their values are based around care for the land, community, creativity and authenticity.

✦ **WHY GO?** Celebrate community and connection to the land with song, dance, arts and crafts, yoga, meditation and play, all without alcoholic drinks or recreational drugs.

✦ **Adult tickets cost £200, or £155 for concessions.**

KINDRED SPIRIT

FESTIVALS YOU CAN'T MISS...

MIND BODY SPIRIT AND WELLBEING FESTIVAL

Trinity Park, Ipswich, 19 to
20 July 2025, 10am to 5pm
100 stands and 50
activities, especially selected
stands to feed and nurture
your heart and soul!
Camping available on-site.
For more info and tickets,
visit lifearts.co.uk

CONVERGENCE WELLNESS CAMPOUT

Astral Valley Art Park,
10288 Koester Springs
Road, French Village,
Missouri 63036, USA,
18 to 21 September 2025
Convergence is a four-day
transformational festival of
music, movement, healing,
ceremony, and connection
– held in nature for seekers,
artists, and conscious
community.
Contact Kayla Heard:
kayla.convergencefest@gmail.com
(970-599-0609) or visit
convergencecampout.com



LOVEJAM CAMPOUT

Glastonbury, 14 to 18 August 2025

A soulful gathering rooted in self-expression, healing, and radical community, the [Lovejam Campout](#) combines ecstatic dance, live music, creative workshops and nature reconnection. No alcohol or drugs – just high vibes, campfire cuddles, and co-created magic.

- ✦ **WHY GO?** Go for the independent, grassroots, community vibes.
- ✦ **Full weekend camping tickets cost £222.**

GREEN GATHERING FESTIVAL

Chepstow, Wales, 31 July to 3 August 2025

A celebration of low-impact living, grassroots activism and off-grid creativity, [Green Gathering](#) offers four days of workshops, live music, permaculture talks, healing spaces and eco-conscious fun. It's entirely powered by renewable energy and run by a not-for-profit cooperative.

- ✦ **WHY GO?** For inspiring ideas on sustainable living, with a soulful, festival twist.
- ✦ **Weekend tickets cost from £170.**

EQUINOX FESTIVAL

Louth, Lincolnshire, 18 to 22 September 2025

A welcoming end-of-summer celebration featuring an eclectic mix of music, healing zones, sound journeys and workshops. With fire rituals, late-night chillout domes and a friendly, inclusive atmosphere, [Equinox Festival](#) is an underground favourite for conscious creatives and sound lovers alike.

- ✦ **WHY GO?** A soothing alternative to larger festivals – perfect for sound lovers and introverts.
- ✦ **Weekend tickets cost £210, plus a booking fee.**



MIND BODY SPIRIT FESTIVAL

Birmingham, 14 to 16 November 2025

This [long-running wellbeing event](#) brings together hundreds of exhibitors, speakers and facilitators offering everything from energy healing and sound baths to spiritual coaching, yoga, tarot and crystal shopping. Great for newcomers and curious explorers of all things spiritual.

- ✦ **WHY GO?** For those looking to dip into diverse conscious living practices in a single space – ideal if time is short!
- ✦ **Tickets cost from £12 for day admission.**

DON'T FORGET TO PACK...

- ✦ **Cosy shawl or blanket for sound sessions**
- ✦ **Natural bug spray if spending time outdoors**
- ✦ **Biodegradable glitter (if you're feeling sparkly!)**
- ✦ **Reusable cutlery and cup**
- ✦ **Small notebook for workshop reflections**



An Esoteric Weekend in Amsterdam

Anna Willatt uncovers the city's hidden spiritual gems, from secret churches to tarot treasures and mystical experiences

Amsterdam has been on quite the journey since its foundation in around 1270. The magical and miraculous draw of this once site of religious pilgrimage has, in more recent years, transmuted into a search for a different kind of enlightenment. Nevertheless, the whispers of its illustrious past peek through in evocative *gevelstenen* gable stones and behemoth buildings of esoteric learning.

You can tell there's something esoteric about Amsterdam – it's on the morning breeze across the canals with a saintly flat white in hand from church-run Priesthood Coffee, discernable in the taste of *Papeneiland* apple pie from the café with hidden tunnels and in the backs of cabinets in tarot collector shops.

Come with me as I show you behind the velvet peepshow curtain to the true Amsterdam. Delve in for an esoteric weekend, and one not to forget.

VISIT

When I started consciously scouting out esoteric spots in my travels, I was bowled over by how many I could find. I say consciously, but for me, the beauty is in the intuitive discovery of a city. Starting with a few spots and allowing your mind to open and your curiosity to pique. I wonder what's down that alley with an interesting name, such as *Spooksteeg*, you say? Well, there's one way to find out...

Ons' Lieve Heer op Solder: Our Lord in the Attic

What could be more esoteric than a 17th century clandestine church (or *schuilkerk*), hidden in plain view? At the time of building the church in 1660, public Catholic worship was prohibited, so Jan Hartman built a church in his attic, spanning three houses and providing space for a 150-strong congregation. The house has been a museum

since 1888 and is an astonishing space, rising from the more austere ground floor living spaces to the exquisite church with baroque altar and simple chambers of Petrus Parmentier and his spiritual daughters (unmarried women who dedicate themselves to the church). A spiritual experience, you can feel the past in these carefully preserved pews.

Tarocks within Fabula Rosa

If, like me, the sight of a rare tarot or oracle deck quickens your pulse, drop an email to Tarocks to view their collection on the mezzanine level of the beautiful Fabula Rosa spiritual shop. On my visit, I left without a much-coveted 'Pam-B' Rider-Waite-Smith deck, but with a modern pocket-sized Dutch Lenormand deck and crystal talisman as a souvenir. Tarocks maintain a comprehensive archive on their website of decks for sale and those that have found their new homes, with the aim to further esoteric resources and learning – a theme that will come up again in Amsterdam.

Katten Kabinet

While this sounds like a typical tourist trap, the story behind the world's only museum dedicated to cats is most unusual. Founded in 1990 to commemorate a beloved tom cat called John Pierpont Morgan, the Katten Kabinet is a curiosity packed collection in a stunning building (once used as a filming location for *Ocean's Twelve*). It spans everything from ancient Egyptian effigies of cats through custom artworks for the founding moggy, a grand salle dedicated to 19th century French artists, and even a mummified cat that belonged to the writer Pierre Loti. It's a joy to be able to explore the eclectic collection up close: resident real-life cats will keep you in check.

The Ritman Library and Embassy of the Free Mind

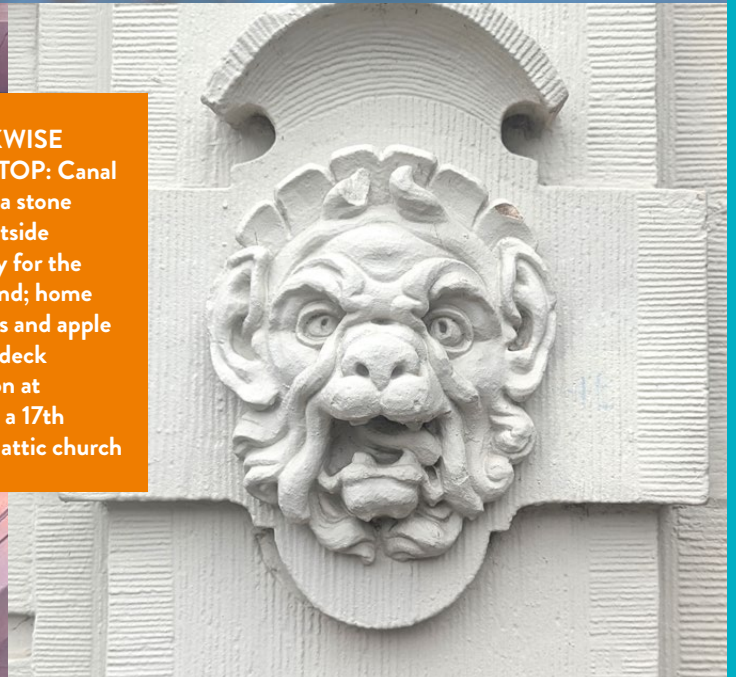
The Ritman Library is an intriguing library focusing on Hermeticism. Joost R Ritman was an Amsterdam businessman with a rich connection to spirituality, and in 2016 he purchased the storied *Huis met de Hoofden* (House with Heads) to house the library and also open the museum. Legend has it that the eponymous heads on the canal-facing frontage depict six thieves who the first maid did away with – although others say they represent six Roman deities.

The new Embassy of the Free Mind was opened in 2017 by the Ritman family and *The Da Vinci Code* author Dan Brown, who has spent a good amount of time with the

REVIEW



CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP: Canal
culture; a stone
relief outside
Embassy for the
Free Mind; home
comforts and apple
pie; the deck
collection at
Tarocks; a 17th
century attic church



collection while researching other works. The Embassy offers an audio tour and sought-after live tours exploring Kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, the Amsterdam grail and other rare pieces in the collection. To delve further into the academia of Western esotericism, head to the History of Hermetic Philosophy school at the University of Amsterdam.

De Bazel

This evocative building now houses the City Archives, but it's the architecture which adds it firmly to our esoteric map of Amsterdam. As the last great work of Karel De Bazel, a theosophist and freemason architect, many believe that esoteric meanings and symbols were sequestered within its design. The Treasure Room is a thrilling space with colourful tiled murals and intriguing symbolism. When I visited, there was a temporary exhibition by local collective Wanderwelle, focusing on the term *genius loci*, or the soul of the place.

If esoteric building markings intrigue you, swing by the macabre outside of 216 Amstels for faint remnants of kabbalistic symbols: they are said to be painted in the blood of a former owner. Rainy day architecture enjoyment can also be found at the exquisite cinema Theater Tuschinski.

EXPERIENCE

Amsterdam is home to a growing number of wonderful practitioners, a sprinkling of which you can find below.

Maja Elders, spiritual guide

I stumbled across the 'Femme Fatale' photographic exhibition by [Maja Elders](#) exploring divine feminine archetypes. She offers feminine empowerment photoshoots, alongside women's circles, reiki and tarot.

Ethereal Ink, channelled intuitive fine-line tattoos

With holistic tattooing practice becoming better known, Ethereal Ink offers channelled tattoos which often come out as protective sigils. A unique souvenir. Follow on Instagram @333.ethereal.ink

Safa Mirror and Witch Lantern at Black Moon Botanica

At this Amsterdam base for the Edinburgh occult emporium, [Black Moon Botanica](#)'s resident readers Safa Mirror and Witch Lantern offer in-depth workshops and tarot readings in a deeply inclusive, cosy atmosphere.

When Nature Calls, biohacking centre

[When Nature Calls](#) is a beautiful newly opened 'centre for optimisation' which offers yoga, cacao ceremonies, shamanic reiki and aromatherapy alongside red light therapy and ice bath sessions. The accompanying



LEFT: Embassy for the Free Mind;
RIGHT: Comfy rooms at the Hoxton



'smartshop' is celebrating over 25 years of supporting the city through adaptogens, nootropics and microdosing.

STAY

[The Hoxton, Lloyd Amsterdam](#) inhabits the wildly impressive former Royal Dutch Shipping Company building in the Eastern Docklands. Built in 1918 for transatlantic migrants heading to South America, it has since housed immigrants and Jewish refugees during the war, and even became a detention centre. In more recent history, it transformed into artist studios and became a hotel once more in 2004.

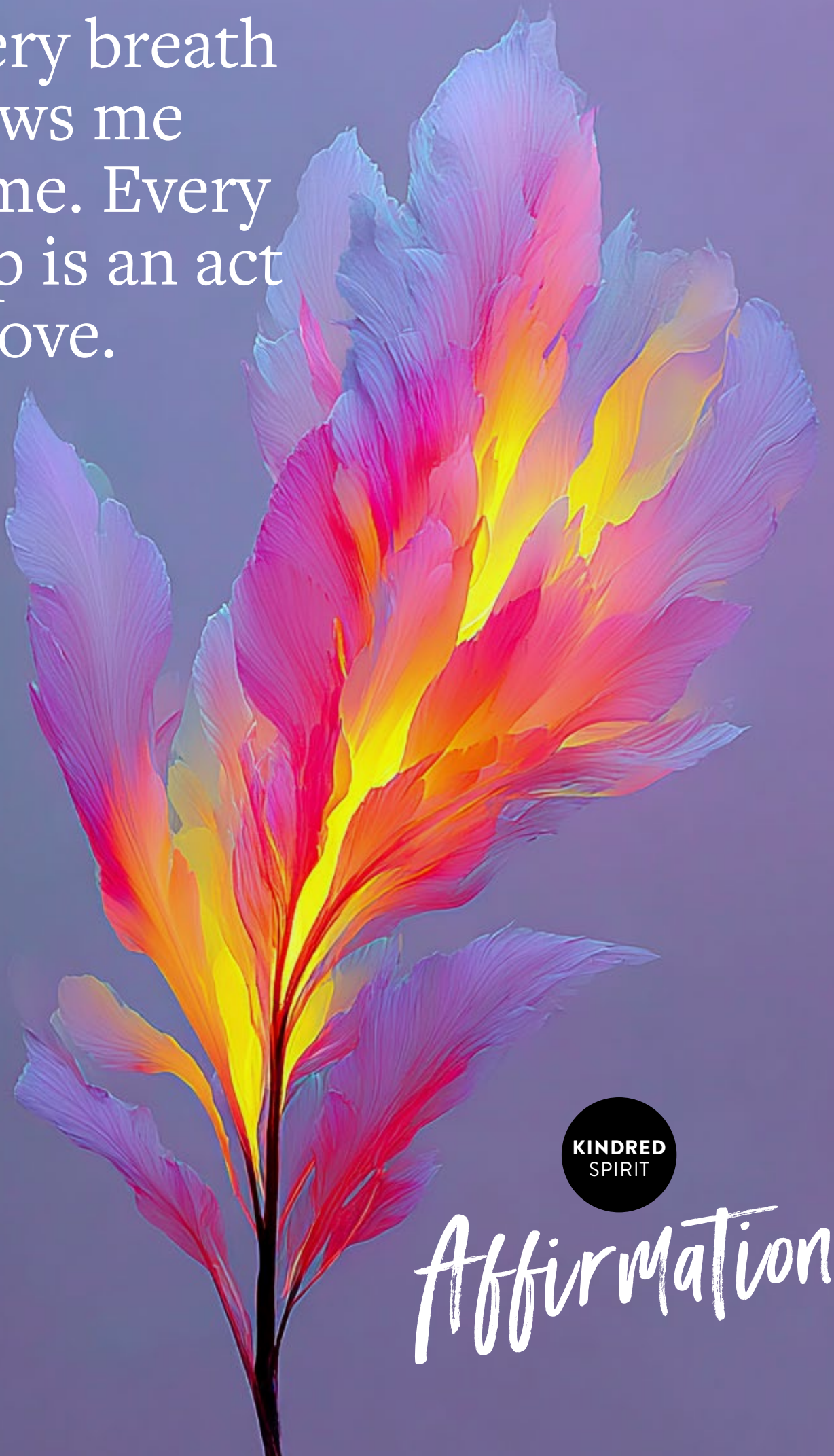
The Hoxton opened their iteration of this storied building in 2023, weaving its past and architectural features such as the tiles in the winding corridor and panelling in the ticketing office-turned-bar, Barbue. As someone who loves psychogeography, I could have spent a weekend just in this hotel, nestled in our cosy room up in the eaves and getting a feel for the past and present co-living in the extensive common areas that Hoxton are known for.

While the hotel is a straight walk or tram ride from the Eurostar terminal, the area offers a more romantic and as-the-wind-blows approach to bimbly away from the crowds. Hop on a free ferry from Java to Eiland (a short walk from the hotel) across to Amsterdam Noord for intriguing offerings in warehouses, such as the playful [Oedipus brewery taproom](#), unique skate bowl restaurant [Skate Cafe](#) and the neighbourhood hub [De Verbroederij](#), with vegetable allotments for the community, beehives and free Friday mindfulness classes, ecstatic family dance time and Chi Kung. ●

Find out more...

- Anna Willatt is a Kent-based travel writer working under the moniker [Esoteric Isle](#), fusing her curiosity for the unseen with the insatiable need to tell everyone all about it.
- Instagram and Substack: @esotericisle

Every breath
draws me
home. Every
step is an act
of love.



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Affirmation

Following Myth and Magic in France

La Mare aux Fées –
the Fairy Pool – in
the Forêt d'Huelgoat

Rob Wildwood, author of an
enchancing new guide to
France, shares inspiration for a
mystical trip following the path of
ancient and modern magic

There are some magical places that are imbued with a power that radiates from the location itself, attracting or creating wonders of different kinds. With some, such as the Val Sans Retour (Valley Without Return) in the forest of Brocéliande or the extraordinary stone alignments of Carnac, to simply visit them is to enter a place of enchantment.

Some are places where treasure is said to have been hidden by fairies or other supernatural beings. Others are said to be the gathering places of ancient Druids, witches or sorcerers, such as the mountain of La Rhune in Basque Country or the Butte de Champillaume on the Great Pilgrimage trail. The Île de Sein, an island in the Atlantic off the coast of Finistère, was the domain of nine priestesses known as the Sènes who were skilled in magic. At other magical places, nocturnal processions of mysterious ghostly figures can be seen on significant dates.

Then there are sites where elemental forces, such as storms, can be summoned by magic. Such places often have supernatural guardians, as at the Fontaine de Barenton in the enchanted forest of Brocéliande.

There are places marked out by unearthly sounds, such as the church bells of the drowned city of Ys coming from the waters of the Baie de Douarnenez in Finistère, or the cries of the doomed lovers cast into the waters of the Gouffre de Huelgoat by the enchantress Princess Dahut, who had been schooled in magic by the nine Sènes. The wild hunt can be heard in the night skies above the Plateau des Fées, close to the sanctuary of Mont Sainte-Odile in the northeast of France.

FORÊT D'HUELGOAT

Walking through this lush forest in the river valley of the Argent is an unforgettable and otherworldly experience, dominated as it is by hundreds of colossal boulders. Some are the size of houses and look like they've been thrown together haphazardly, piled on top of each other in angular shapes to form caves and passageways. French geologists call these rock formations a 'chaos', but tradition considered them the work of giants or even the remains of an ancient city they once inhabited.

The Huelgoat Forest is also said to be haunted by fairies and other ethereal beings, whose domain lies



Giant rock formations dominate the landscape at the Forêt d'Huelgoat

beneath the rocks. The Argent runs through it, sometimes over, sometimes under the rocks, forming pools, waterfalls and cataracts that add to the sense of being in a world conjured from myth. The river gets its name from the nearby silver mines that have been there since at least Roman times. In the 1500s, the river was dammed to form the Lac d'Huelgoat, which supplied water to the mines. The town of Huelgoat now surrounds the lake.

Further into the forest of oak, beech and pine trees is a jumble of even more massive rocks known as the *Ménage de la Vierge*, named because of their resemblance to household (*ménage*) items such as a ladle and cauldron. Among the rocks is the Fontaine de la Vierge, a rock basin that, although above the river and protected from rain by an overhang, is always filled with water. According to local custom, throwing coins into the water or floating a pin on the surface will reveal answers to questions about the person's future.

The most famous of the forest's sites is the Roche Tremblante de Huelgoat (Shaking Rock), reached either by walking further along the trail from the *Ménage de la*

Vierge or by road. This massive rock, lying on its side at the top of an incline, weighs 140 tonnes and is 7 metres long by 3 metres high. Apply a slow but strong rhythmical pressure to one corner of the stone by pushing your back into the rock and pressing upwards, and you'll feel it rock back and forth. It's said that this strange phenomenon is due to the fairies of the forest who enchanted the stone after local townsfolk prevented workmen from breaking it up for building material.

VAL SANS RETOUR, TRÉHORENTEUC

This forested valley has become identified with the domain of the enchantress Morgan le Fay, half-sister of Arthur and leader of the nine sorceresses of the Isle of Avalon. The valley features in Arthurian romance under various names such as the Perilous Vale or Valley of False Lovers. A trail leads up the valley from the Église du Graal, and after a welcoming waterfall named the Cascade de Rauco, you come to the Miroir aux Fées (Fairies' Mirror), also known as the Lac de Morgane.

The lake's surface is so still and clear that the fairies of



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Moving the Shaking Rock at Forêt d'Huelgoat; the gold-leaf-covered Arbre d'Or glints through the trees at Val Sans Retour; a Bronze Age chamber known as the Giant's Tomb; a 'chaos' of rocks



Pointe du Raz and Baie des Trépassés near Douarnenez in northwestern France

the forest and even Morgan herself are said to come and gaze at their reflections in the water. It's an enchanting place, with waterlilies floating on the surface and the occasional croaking of frogs.

Nearby is a piece of modern magic, the Arbre d'Or (Golden Tree), a chestnut tree covered in gold leaf. Surrounded by five trees blackened by the devastating fire of 1990, it symbolises the indestructibility of the forest and of nature. Jagged stones encircle the tree to prevent vandalism and green ferns flourish all around. Already, folklore has grown up around this tree, said to bear golden leaves at night that the elf-like lutins collect for a magic potion that heals the burnt trees. Glimpsed through the forest, the Golden Tree really looks like it comes from another, more magical realm.

DOUARNENEZ

The legendary lost city of Ys was said to have been submerged beneath the waters of the Baie de Douarnenez, a name thought to derive from the Breton for 'new land' because the town was founded by survivors of the cataclysm. Locals tell of church bells heard ringing beneath crashing waves during storms, and even of its buildings being glimpsed by sailors and divers, while others consider Ys to be a gateway to an otherworldly realm.

The legend of a land lost beneath the sea recurs in Celtic folklore and includes the Cantre'r Gwaelod (Lowland Hundred) under Cardigan Bay in Wales, and the

lost land of Lyonesse off Land's End in Cornwall. At least part of the Baie de Douarnenez was above water in ancient times. In the 19th century the remains of a dolmen were revealed during an exceptionally low tide near the Île Tristan, an island connected to the town of Douarnenez at low tide and said to be the only part of the lost city of Ys that survived the cataclysm.

With links to another famous Celtic myth, the island was considered the burial place of the lovers Tristan and Iseult from the tales of King Arthur. Their tomb was said to be hidden on the island as protection from the wrath of King Marc'h, Iseult's vengeful husband, and two trees grew from it, their branches intertwining. The Île Tristan is now a protected conservation site that's only open to the public on certain days. ●

Find out more...

● This feature has been extracted from *Magical France: 500 Sacred and Mystical Sites* by Rob Wildwood (£18.99, Wild Things Publishing), out now. Readers can receive 20% off and free P&P with discount code 'KindredSpirit' at: wildthingspublishing.com





KINDRED
SPIRIT

Affirmation

Life flows
in perfect
rhythm, and
I am part of
its dance.

The Art of Letting Go in the **French Alps**

In the heart of the French Alps, Naomi Fowler discovers that skiing is more than just a sport – it's a lesson in mindfulness, sustainability, and the beauty of letting go

Nestled between the glossy peaks of the French Alps sit two charming resorts full of character, and what felt like what would have been nostalgia – had I been French or from a family of avid skiers. This was a journey through Orcières Merlette 1850 and Serre Chevalier, but unexpectedly, also a journey through my subconscious mind while embracing a challenging new sport as an adult.

Both resorts act as a haven for seasoned skiers, families, friends and people like us newbies seeking a deeper connection with nature and with ourselves. The well-balanced blend of outdoor experiences and the more tame hydrotherapy spas felt like the *yin* to my *yang* during this wintry retreat. My insightful visit became a reflection on the interconnectedness between us as travellers, and the beauty of nature and how she provides for us.

SUSTAINABILITY AND THE SLOPES

My early flight on our day of arrival meant the curved roads into the mountains put me straight to sleep. As I awoke, opening my eyes, it was as if I was a child again, both surprised and excited by the appearance of snow. I couldn't help but to peer through the window with my eyes wide open against the glass. The majestic peaks glisten against clear skies, proving to be an ideal landscape for both adventure and introspection. The air which circulates through the snowy valleys feels fresh and greets you with a sense of renewal.

Orcières Merlette 1850 and Serre Chevalier took my heart to places I always cherish on reflection when I travel. They combine sustainable travel with mindful exploration. The holistic wellness spas and adrenaline-fuelled slopes aren't the only highlights which would pull me back here again. The charm came when I witnessed the connection people have to their outdoor environment.

The locals are extremely proud of their regional produce. Alpine cheeses and wines, accompanied by flavours of medicinal herbs and honey, are a staple story to the senses all on their own. If food isn't the way to warm your heart, try getting to know your ski instructor a little. Their stories of trading city life to lead their lives on the slopes are inspiring – and for good reason. In a world of concrete cities and jobs which leave us sitting at our desks all day, who wouldn't dream of retreating to somewhere like the Alps?

What inspired me the most is how these two resorts both beam with a positive and well-established drive to infiltrate sustainability efforts. By recognising the importance of locally sourced foods, traditional farming methods and the use of green energy, we can easily reflect on our impact as tourists. I couldn't help but feel that as tourists, by travelling to such a pristine and precious place with so much beauty to offer, we also hold some of the responsibility to support the preservation of these fragile landscapes for future generations.

By choosing resorts such as Orcières Merlette 1850 and Serre Chevalier, it made it incredibly easy to see

first-hand how locals are adapting, with significant steps to minimise their carbon footprint, as well as ours as visitors.

SKIING AS A MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

While the sustainability initiatives of these resorts are impressive, my journey became insightful. Initially apprehensive, my ski instructor at Orcières held onto me tightly while I attempted a raised piece of snow the height of a doorstep in my skis for the first time. She taught me the 'pizza slice' and then said 'Ready?' as if she knew what was coming.

Sure-fire, I landed on my tush and laughed it off as the instructor helped me back up with a warm and gentle smile. I could feel the anxiety and self-doubt start to creep in and instantly had to pull myself back to my teachings, as if I were speaking to one of my classes during meditation. I could feel the parallels piecing together between my mat and the slopes. 'Just let go', I kept telling myself.

But it wasn't about what I was thinking, it was about how I felt in my body. When we are frightened or holding onto fear, we tense up, preventing us more than protecting us. I could feel my upper body holding onto a tightness which restricted movement in my knees and the ski boots. I took a deep breath and decided to relax into the feeling of movement on the snow by dropping into that lightness in my body. As soon as I did this, I could relax into the muscle memory and how it feels to just let go while still controlling my movements.

Just as in meditation, I noticed skiing requires ultimate trust in the self, focus and the willingness to let go. With each inhale I found my balance, and with each exhale I released any fear and self-doubt holding me back. This brought my mind into a space of calm and centredness until I was able to attempt a higher slope. These disciplinary acts of self-knowledge teach us to embrace the unknown, trust in the process and find joy in the journey. While I was exploring a new way of connecting with myself, I could feel the interconnectedness between the daily lives of the locals, the slopes and its visitors, which made my experience all the more heartfelt.

The local leisure complex offers a well-earned retreat, with space for both families and groups of friends in mind. Ski holidays have long been the joy of families and friends coming together to share in uplifting, invigorating experiences. The saunas and thermal pools provide instant relief from tired muscles while also being a place to unwind from the day, reflect and share stories of adrenaline and achievement.

REGIONAL FLAVOURS AND ECO-CONSCIOUS MENUS

As much as I enjoy indulging on a trip away, I'm more interested in seeking out those locally rooted experiences. If I'm indulging in something exquisite, I always want to know the whos, the whats, the wheres and the whys. As with anything, it's about balance and full appreciation.

After hours on the slopes, nothing feels more rewarding than relaxing around the table with like-minded individuals



LEFT, BELOW:
The perfect
backdrop to
immerse in a snowy
alpine retreat
RIGHT: Ski
instructors in the
Alps are proud of
the life they have
chosen – and for
good reason!



and a warm meal to nourish both the body and soul. For the French, I noticed that food is more than just a way to fill a hole. It's a whole gastronomic celebration of family and friends coming together to share in the delight of tradition and local craftsmanship.

During my visit to Orcières Merlette 1850, two family-run restaurants granted me a memorable experience. Pastourelle and Cro Magnon have established the art of combining locally sourced produce with a deep respect for their landscape and Alpine culinary heritage.

PASTOURELLE: BRINGING THE ALPS TO THE TABLE

While entering this rustic wooden chalet you are instantly greeted with rich smells of cheeses, wines and flavourful herbs which delicately emit from the woodwork. Everything encapsulates the alpine dining experience. With ingredients and wines sourced from nearby farms and vineyards, the menu is a tribute to the region's long-standing traditional agricultural history.

Their selection of wines in particular were outstanding. Carefully curated to highlight the region's biodynamic vineyards, a glass of the 'M de Manon', a 2022 barrel from the Hautes-Alpes region, carried the *Indication Géographique Protégée* (IGP) stamp, ensuring its regional authenticity.

Pairing it with partridge just made sense. The red from this region has a dark appeal. With a note of cherry and

blackcurrant, it offers a subtle spice and herbal undertone, all of which complemented the gamey, slightly earthy tones of the partridge. I could gauge my enjoyment of this pairing by how quickly I could drink the wine. As somebody who is not usually a drinker, I certainly relish the opportunity to experience a local artisan quality wine list.

Everything about this cosy restaurant felt enchanting. The alpine decor, crafted from reclaimed wood and stone, meant every detail of this restaurant's menu and interior spoke of warmth, sustainability and community.

CRO MAGNON: ALPINE INDULGENCE AT ITS FINEST

If Pastourelle had gathered all things alpine and culinary heritage, then Cro Magnon continued to deliver the interpretation of alpine indulgence.

As we approached the restaurant, I was instantly impressed by its traditional chalet structure of natural stone and woodwork. Nestled between pine trees and a heap of snow, entering felt like stepping into a winter grotto. A dining space which felt both relaxed and deeply in tune with its landscape. Red gingham tablecloths and fluffy sheepskin cushions decked the intimate space. The deep fondues of melted local cheeses and a decadent trio of desserts served their purpose perfectly after a day on the slopes.

After being in the cold and practising a high-intensity sport like skiing, you can see why a melted cheese fondue is



a regional favourite. It fills that sweet spot between replenishing used energy from the day and grounding you in a safe and comforting space of pure bliss, pre-food coma. The local herbal-infused medicinal liquor, *génépi*, seems to blend its way into almost anything, from cocktails to desserts. Its warming aroma and aniseed taste act as a pleasant digestive at the end of any meal.

Both restaurants here provide a sense of authenticity and heritage. These are places where families and friends come together to let go of life's woes and appreciate all things local in an act of togetherness: an infusion of regional flavours and shared enjoyment. It is a testimony to the community that it isn't just about what's on the menu, but the cherished landscape and how retreating to a place of warmth on a winter's night is the recipe to recoup and reminisce on the days gone by.

A HEART OF SUSTAINABILITY

At the height of our concern for the environment, nobody in the tourism industry has established such a drive to protect its natural wonders more than Serre Chevalier. They have truly gone above and beyond to prove we can have a sustainable approach to tourism.

Serre Chevalier is leading the way in the Alps when it comes to its pioneering use of green energy. Solar panels, hydroelectric power and wind turbines all generate a significant portion of this resort's energy. Even their ski lifts are designed to minimise energy waste. With their heat recovery systems, they are repurposing excess energy for operations within the resort – which is inspirational.

Taking great strides to preserve the natural environment, this resort has an ethos of sustainability which runs through their entire destination. Demonstrating that luxury and sustainability can co-exist, Serre Chevalier is breeding a new tourism market who come specifically for their resourceful conservation effort and eco-friendly design of the entire resort.

Being one of the largest ski resorts in Europe, the fact that sustainability is at the forefront of their agenda makes them a role model in the tourism industry. While the resort offers everything from the panoramic views of the famous

Grands Bains (Grand Baths) of Monêtier and walking expeditions, to igloos and tipis which serve fireside meals in the heart of the alpine wilderness, it's their commitment to environmental responsibility which truly stood out during my visit.

If you're looking for somewhere to release tension and relax from the constant hammering of noise and distraction of the everyday world, Serre Chevalier is a place where you can put your mind at rest, without the worry that your travels might have an environmental impact too.

LESSONS FROM THE ALPS


As I reflect on my time in the French Alps, I want to express how this trip became more than just about skiing and luxurious ways to unwind. It is an invitation to slow down and reconnect with yourself in ways which inspire us both spiritually and mentally. The art of letting go here entwines many aspects of sustainable travel with ways to reconnect with the self and sensory enjoyment.

While staring out towards the mountainous landscapes, I felt a profound sense of stillness. Every moment became an invitation to slow down and be present, enjoying the everyday moments of life and its simplicities: landscape, local authenticity, community and togetherness. Embracing the art of letting go meant I could fully relax, knowing that these forward-thinking resorts offer more than just a winter getaway. They invite us to connect with nature and rediscover the joy of presence and appreciation over escapism. I found myself on a mindful adventure with ample amounts of hope for a more sustainable future. ●

Find out more...

- [Orcières Merlette 1850](#) offers flexible durations, including single day passes and multi-day packages.
- [Serre Chevalier](#) provides passes ranging from three hours to 15 days.
- Check the official websites for the resorts for the most up-to-date pricing information.

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Retreat to the North: The Spiritual Call of Iceland

Stephanie Schwarz explores the mystical energy of Iceland's power places and the deep spiritual wisdom of the north



Going on retreat to Bali or another warm place has its charm: waking up to the sound of tropical birds, decorating your hair with frangipani flowers, and unwinding in the humid air. I love it, and for many years of my life I followed the sun to all those beautiful destinations around the globe.

Then Iceland came into my life, and it has changed everything. Sometimes our soul is calling for something else – for a rather different, unexpected experience. Retreating to the north and learning its wisdom was this experience to me. And whilst my ego was still denying that the cold north was meant for me, my heart and soul were already cracked open by the Nordic charm and pureness.

Iceland, the raw and untamed island in the midst of the north Atlantic ocean, has been attracting nature lovers, hiking enthusiasts, birdwatchers and wanderers for decades. Most visitors explain the pull of the beauty of nature, the untouched wilderness and the presence of the elements. The vast, dramatic landscapes, active volcanoes, thousands of waterfalls, black lava sand beaches and geothermal hot springs leave locals and visitors in awe – again and again.

But there is more to it than just the natural beauty of the land. There is a part of Iceland hidden from our human eye, and neither can it be understood by our mind. There is a beauty and magic that only unfolds when we truly slow down. When we pause our thinking mind, let go of expectations and instead open our hearts. When we give ourselves permission to simply be and receive.

More and more yogis, seekers and spiritual travellers recognise those powerful energies of the north beyond its visible beauty, and Iceland is becoming an insider tip amongst retreat goers.

ICELAND'S POWER PLACES

Iceland is often considered one of the most energetic locations on earth. Reasons for that are the immense volcanic activity and charge just



The majestic Hvítserkur monolith off the shore of the Vatnsnes peninsula

beneath the surface of the earth, as well as the large areas of untamed, wild nature which has not been adjusted or cultivated by mankind.

Some people believe that besides its unique geological features, Iceland is also home to many leys, which are the invisible energy pathways that cover our globe. Locations where leys intersect are thought to hold concentrated spiritual energy, and are often referred to as power places. Across the world, one can find sacred monuments or heritage of deep spiritual, tribal and cultural meaning at those power spots, and many people view these sites as sacred or highly charged with spiritual significance.

Iceland is home to many of those power places, which hold a unique atmosphere whether one believes in the concept of leys or not. Seven of those power places are said to be extraordinarily energetic, and some refer to them as the seven chakras of Iceland. Many of those sites are located in the remote highlands, accessible only during the short Icelandic summer and by foot or 4x4 vehicle. But some are right there for the curious and open-minded visitor to experience and explore.

THE BEAUTY OF SNÆFELLSNES

About three and a half hours' drive northwest of Iceland's capital Reykjavik, the magical Snæfellsnes Peninsula is waiting to be explored. It is a place of beauty with impressive beaches, rugged coastline and gentle

mountain scenery. At the tip of the diverse peninsula lies Mount Snæfellsjökull, a stunning and iconic glacier-volcano that has long been regarded as a sacred site in Icelandic mythology. In Icelandic, *Snæfell* means 'snow mountain', and *jökull* is a glacier.

This natural site was famously featured in Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* as a gateway to the inner world. And up until now, locals and spiritual practitioners have considered it one of Iceland's main power spots, associated with the notion of an opening into the inner world and to higher realms of consciousness. Many people who visit the site report feeling a sense of deep, almost otherworldly peace and connection to the forces of nature.

Snæfellsjökull also represents a balance between opposing forces: fire and ice, the volcano's molten core and the cool glacier cap. This polarity represents the balance of energies in life: light and dark, masculine and feminine, creation and destruction. Witnessing those energies co-existing in nature can be seen as a metaphor and inspiration for our own spiritual growth. Both energies are part of existence and our lives and once we stop judging them, there is beauty in all of it.

EMBRACING THE ELEMENTS

A second area of deep meaning and spiritual significance is the Troll Peninsula, also called Tröllaskagi, in the northern part of Iceland. The Troll Peninsula is named for its connection



The north-central Icelandic highlands are known for vivid geothermal colours, hot springs and steam emissions

to mythological trolls, common in Norse traditions. In Icelandic folklore, mountains, rivers and rocks are often viewed as homes for spirits, and the landscape of the Troll Peninsula is no exception. It's said that many of the peaks on the peninsula were formed by trolls who turned to stone, and their presence imbues the land with an aura of mystery.

Tröllaskagi is home to a majestic mountain range with dramatic peaks, deep fjords and isolated valleys, as well as charming little fishing villages. This region is less frequently visited, and being just below the polar circle, time seems to slow down. Arriving in northern Iceland feels like a big, long exhale. The landscape gives off a mystical energy that attracts those seeking solitude and introspection.

The Troll Peninsula, with its diverse natural features, also carries the energy of the four classical elements: earth, air, fire and water. The powerful and grounding mountains represent the earth, the winds that sweep across the region speak to the force of air, the volcanic activity – especially around the area of Mývatn – brings in the element of fire, and the surrounding deep blue waters of the fjords and the Arctic Ocean invoke water. The interaction of these forces invites personal balance and harmony for those who are sensitive to the energy of the land.

All in all, Iceland's power places offer a fascinating combination of natural beauty and spiritual

significance. Whether you visit to experience healing, self-discovery, or simply to be enveloped by the land's energy, the connection you feel to nature and to your own inner self can be profound.

HIDDEN SPIRITS

Keep in mind when roaming through Iceland that, most likely, you will never be completely alone. That's because Iceland is not only populated by almost 400,000 inhabitants (most of them descendants of the Viking settlers from Norway and Ireland) – the country's mountains, rocks, hills and waters are also teeming with natural spirits, elves and hidden people.

The Icelanders' belief in elves and nature spirits – the so-called *huldufólk*, or hidden people – is deeply rooted in the country's folklore and traditions, which are influenced by centuries of isolation and the harsh natural environment. Many Icelanders maintain a deep respect for these invisible beings, which is tied to the idea that humans should not disturb or harm the natural environment, as it is home to these spirits.

Whilst not all Icelanders are able to see or feel the existence of the hidden people, there are people with psychic and clairvoyant powers who can mediate between both worlds, bridging the messages of the hidden people and the needs of the modern world. When building new roads or houses, for example, Nordic shamans or seers can be asked to make sure the construction plans don't interfere with an established elf settlement.

Retreat-goers to Iceland have the beautiful opportunity to practise their own clairvoyant abilities, and to receive the messages and wisdom of the Icelandic nature spirits. ●

Find out more...

- At '[Holistic Retreats in Iceland](#)' Stephanie Schwarz designs mindful retreats in Iceland for yoga teachers, therapists, coaches and other holistic and spiritual retreat leaders.
- Photo credit: Visit North Iceland

KINDRED SPIRIT

RETREATS YOU CAN'T MISS... IN THE UK

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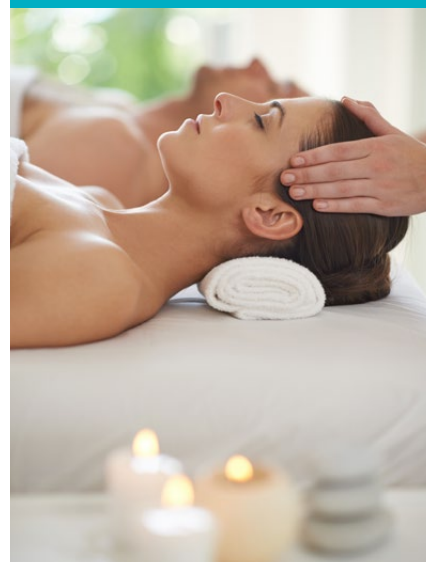
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Participants settle into a mindful yoga session with Sam, one of the many practices designed to awaken energy and inner clarity

Reconnection Retreat

Claire Gillman travels to Sweden to reconnect with herself

On my return from Sweden, I am routinely asked, 'How was your retreat?' Never before have I found it so difficult to answer such a simple question. Amazing, wonderful, profound, transformational are the words that spring to my lips, but don't seem to do justice to my experience – and I want to do this retreat justice because it feels important to me to do so. I know instinctively and from personal experience that this retreat can change lives.

So, let me start by telling you what is offered over five days at the Narumi Center, and then I will touch on the clarity that I gained from participating – the point in doing so being that my own reconnection to Self and the new understanding of reality that I got through this simple, unique approach, is available to all.

The retreat is run by two Brits, Sam and Kris, who ordinarily run yoga and *qi gong* classes in Knaresborough, North Yorkshire. The third instructor is Navid, a Swedish non-duality meditation teacher, and the course is run from his beautiful family homestead in the forests of Uppland, about 100 kms north of Stockholm.

The retreat combines various modalities, principally yoga and *qi gong*, but you also get to sample sound baths, mantra and kirtan chanting, breathwork, reiki and cold water swimming in a lake (optional, of course, and utterly wonderful). At its core and underpinning Sam and Kris' work in all of these modalities is Navid's teaching and meditation on non-duality.

In other words, the energy work and opening that take place during the various daily sessions run expertly by Sam and Kris – and there are three or four activities a day –

are designed in such a way as to help you to open so that you can more readily experience the non-duality revelations that can unfold during Navid's teachings.

NOURISHING PRACTICES

This immersive retreat offers a balance between guided practices and space for your own exploration – a combination that nourishes mind, body and spirit.

At the start of all her classes, Sam likes to check in with how each participant is feeling in mind, body and soul. She also invites you to ask your inner self the question, 'What would you have me know today?' and to note the response in your journal – useful feedback for her and for yourself. This practice of regular self-enquiry sets the tone for the whole retreat.

The timetable of Sam's yoga sessions and Kris' qi gong practices, plus the other modalities they offer, is designed to help you connect with yourself, calm your mind, nourish your body, and principally to move energy. They both teach in a relaxed, organic fashion, adapting the session to abilities, mood of the group, how our bodies may be feeling, and energy levels.

Sam actually incorporates quite a lot of qi gong movement into her yoga teaching, as is her custom back in the UK, and her classes are always expansive and flowing. I particularly enjoyed the session she led of chakra-balancing yoga – I felt amazing afterwards in body, mind and soul.

Sam and Kris are both skilful, empathic teachers with a lot of experience and knowledge to draw upon, and their sessions are delivered in a sensitive, caring and natural way. And if you are particularly drawn to one of the styles of practice, they are able to point you towards a range of further resources.

For example, when Kris led the mantra and kirtan chanting session one evening, he gave us a comprehensive handout that not only included the words to the songs, but also information on the effects of mantras, pronunciations, chakra roles, background on the Hindu deities that we were praising, as well as the energetic effects we might experience. The whole group loved this session and we ended up euphorically dancing around the yoga shala, beaming at each other.

The days have a lot of activities packed in, from the pre-breakfast session until a class before bed, but there is plenty of down time factored in for relaxation, contemplation and assimilation of teachings too. There is also room within the timetable for fluidity. So, as the weather was so glorious during our retreat in early June, we all jumped at the suggestion to take one of Kris' qi gong sessions outside on the lawns, for example.

One evening, we did a yin yoga (a more slow-paced style, where you hold the positions for longer) and yoga nidra (a yogic 'sleep' induced by a guided meditation) session with Sam, as she felt that it would benefit us more than an active session. It was blissful and she judged the mood of the group exactly right.

Both Sam and Kris are gifted reiki practitioners, and each participant gets one session during their stay included

within the retreat price – something that would be a paid for extra on many other retreats, I suspect.

EXPLORING NON-DUALITY MEDITATION WITH NAVID

Navid's teaching and meditation sessions are seamlessly woven throughout the timetable and from day one, he took us on a deep dive into who you are (beyond the ideas your mind has about yourself), and what is reality? In a relaxed, at times humorous way, he teaches using self-enquiry and direct experience. Namely, he invites you to ask questions of yourself that are cleverly framed so you are pointed to inner truths and conclusions that you arrive at yourself.

In his sessions, he encourages you to be questioning – sceptical even – and to share doubts, questions and misgivings. He is clear that there are no right or wrong observations/reflections, and no judgement from him.

In response to our queries and occasional confusion, for greater clarification, he candidly shares personal anecdotes and draws on experiences and shortcomings from his own ongoing journey with reality and Self. Then, rather than expecting you to take his answers as gospel, he invites you to ask the same question of your own higher self, to connect to the truth of your Self/Soul/Isness – call it what you will – as this is where the enduring truth lies.

His style of Simran meditation is not designed to give you answers or even a temporarily peaceful state of mind, but for you to bring about clarity about the true nature of reality and of the Self yourself in a simple and natural way.

A less 'guru'-like teacher you couldn't wish to meet. Navid is a modern, family man whose teaching style shuns the traditional, didactic, instructional approach. Instead, he expertly led us through guided meditations and exercises to make our own discoveries. And once made, they become a powerful knowing.

In my case, despite having written on non-duality before, it was only through Navid's guidance and simple practices that I came to be able to separate my 'experiencer' of life from the 'observer'. That is to say, to recognise that what I experience on earth through my senses of sight, taste, hearing, smell and touch can be observed by the unwavering essence of who I am, and in exactly the same way, I can recognise that my thoughts, emotions and ego are not who I really am either.

As someone who likes to analyse and rationalise, it was a revelation for me to realise that my mind (and the ego) plays no part in this reconnection to true self (except to get in the way), and that I cannot intellectualise non-duality – I can only experience it.

Despite a career of describing practices for the benefit of readers, I would say that the essence of Self is intangible and pretty much indescribable – something of an anathema for a journalist. What I would add though is that, once you have had a glimpse of it, you know the truth of it.

For me, it was more like a remembering than arriving at a new idea. It feels like coming home. And I was not alone in this discovery – other participants, some of whom were completely new to spiritual concepts, had similar

KINDRED SPIRIT

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ABOVE: Relaxing
views in the
Swedish mountains
BELOW: Claire,
second from right,
smiles with her
fellow retreat-goers



Expect friendly, communal vibes at the Narumi Retreat Center



experiences. Thus, we all found this retreat hugely comforting and reassuring, as well as great fun.

Of course, the great challenge for a retreat such as this is in helping participants to be able to retain these truths and access 'Self' when they are back in their everyday lifestyles, and away from the blissful yet rarefied sphere of the retreat. This is something that is acknowledged and addressed by the team of leaders who run sessions towards the end of the retreat on integration, and also offer workshops and one-to-one sessions after our return to 'normal' life, so that if you think you have 'lost it' somehow, there is some gentle guidance back towards reconnection.

PRACTICALITIES AND LOGISTICS

The retreat is set in the most beautiful and tranquil forest surroundings. Although quite remote, it is easily accessible from Stockholm airport by train. My flights meant that I stayed one night before the retreat in Uppsala – a handsome university town with lots to see. Pick-ups and drop offs at the local station are part of the package, and it is only a short but scenic train ride from Stockholm airport (45 minutes) or Uppsala (30 minutes) to Tobo station.

All meals are included in the retreat and the food is exceptional. Originally from Iran, Navid cooks amazing Middle Eastern-influenced vegetarian meals and the food is plentiful. Every day, we ate our meals *al fresco* in the garden, sometimes with Navid's young family joining us, and each evening we sat around a campfire for dinner until our final pre-bed relaxation session. On the last night, there was a wood-fired hot-tub under the stars to round it all off.

The five-day/four-night retreat is spent largely outdoors in nature when you are not in the yoga shala, although I guess this is slightly weather dependent. The retreat deliberately has a glamping vibe rather than a luxury spa feel to it, and the facilities are rustic.

There is only shared accommodation on offer, basic but clean composting and burning toilets, and a shared shower room. Potentially, I suspect this could put off a few people, but that would be a great shame because the facilities and simple approach work just fine, and a break from modern

luxuries and conveniences affords a rare opportunity to destress and reconnect.

Despite slight misgivings ahead of the retreat, my 'dorm' experience engendered a special closeness with my fellow room-mates. Each night, we lay inside our individual mosquito nets writing our journals and having a good giggle before dropping into a dead sleep. One guy on the trip reported sleeping better than he had in many years, and this was a recurring theme among participants.

The only negative note I might sound is that, in June, the mosquitoes are out and about in the evenings, so it's wise to pack some repellent and long-sleeved clothing – but it really is not much of a problem, and I am nit-picking here.

The odd mozzie bite soon fades, but the realisations gained on this retreat will, I suspect, last a lifetime. I hesitate to use the over-used term 'awakening', but I witnessed how this retreat was a turning point for many of the participants on the retreat with me. I can wholeheartedly and unequivocally add that this retreat has helped me to connect to a truer part of myself and to awaken to the inherent wisdom within.

Months after our return, posts in our retreat participants' WhatsApp group testify to the fact that people are still experiencing a new perspective on life that has supported them to feel less jostled by the inevitable challenges that we all face in our human experience.

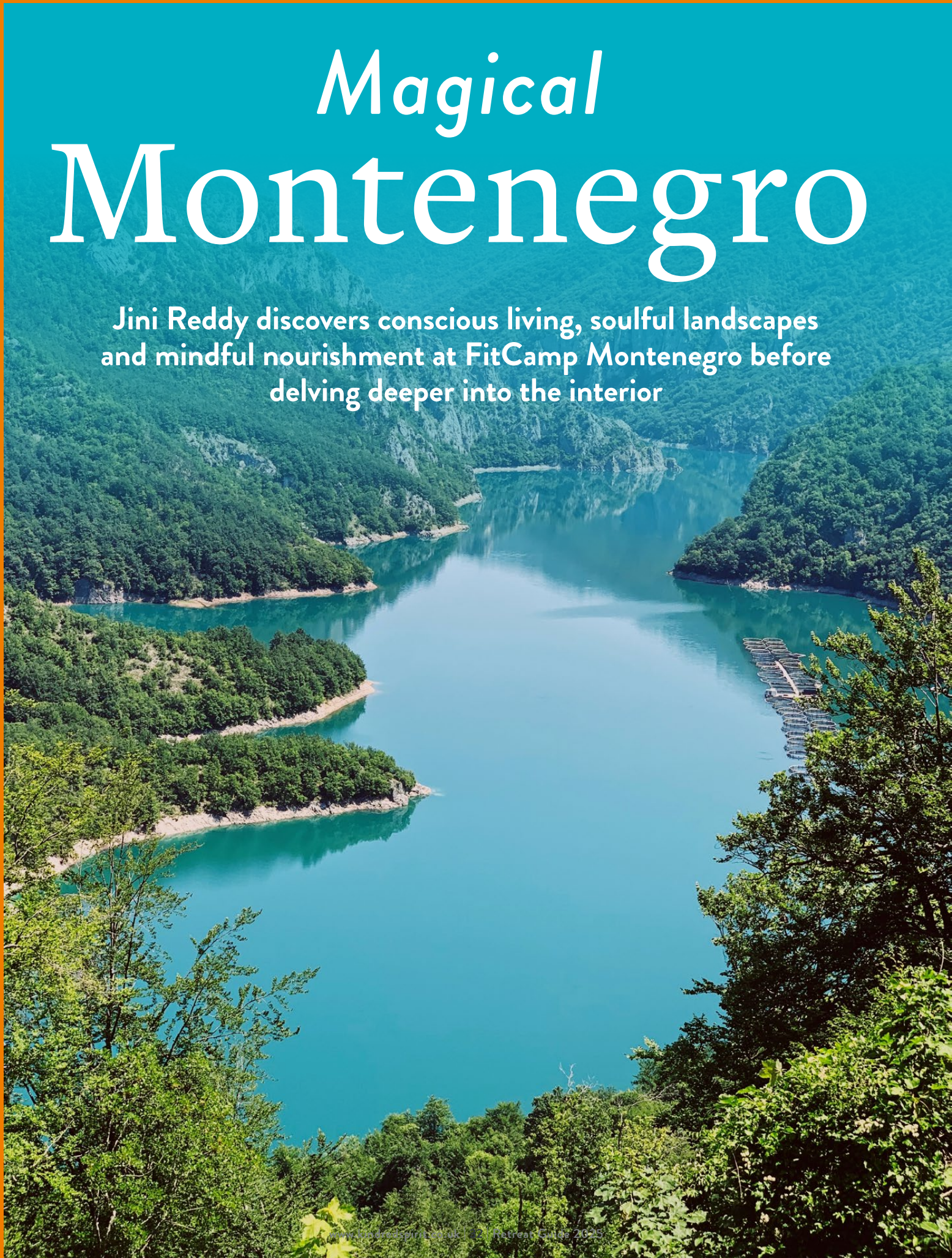
For those wanting to reconnect with Self away from the distractions and noise of daily life, I can highly recommend a Swedish Summer Reconnection Retreat with Sam, Kris and Navid. ●

Find out more...

- **Check online** for the dates and prices (excluding travel) of Sam, Kris and Navid's upcoming retreats at [Narumi Retreat Center in Uppland, Sweden](#).
- **Sam and Kris:** santosharose.com
- **Navid:** simranmeditation.com and insighttimer.com/simranmeditation

Magical Montenegro

Jini Reddy discovers conscious living, soulful landscapes
and mindful nourishment at FitCamp Montenegro before
delving deeper into the interior



These days, as the sole carer to an elderly mother, my time away is carefully planned for spring and summer, when I feel I can dial down the worry and escape for a bit of me-time. The few trips I make take on a greater significance. I was itching to get away and craved a retreat, or if not, at least peaceful time outdoors – but where? Unusually for me, I was lacking in inspiration, which I blame on fatigue and overload.

It's safe to say Montenegro, the small Balkans country in the southeast of Europe, hadn't featured on my radar. This changed when I received an invitation from Andjela Djokic. Andjela is the founder of Fitcamp Montenegro, a retreat in the hills beyond Nikšić, the country's second largest city. She was keen for me to experience the country's interior, a world away from the coast and its crowds, and a wonderland of unspoilt mountains, lakes, forests and pastures.

SETTLING INTO THE RETREAT

Where does a retreat with the name of 'Fitcamp' fit in? The word conjured up images of old-school weight-loss camps. Happily, the reality is the antithesis of a soulless regimented break, and relaxation, wellbeing and mindfulness – not the shedding of pounds – is the focus. The Fitcamp's base, a rustic farmhouse on 19 acres of land, is an eyrie from which to contemplate the mountain scenery and soak up the rippling birdsong.

Stays are geared to ethically and flexibly-minded solo travellers, though couples and very small groups of friends are welcome. Connection with nature (more connection if you're already a lover of the wild, or reconnection if you're a lapsed acolyte), yoga, meditation and holistic nutrition talks, interspersed with delicious plant-based meals, are among the offerings. Essentially, a stay can be tailored to suit the desires of your weary self. I'm here to sample the five-night 'Yoga Getaway'.

'I want to give people a taste of conscious living', says Andjela, who lives here with her husband Matija, when I arrive after my early morning flight from London. The farm's friendly dog Sivi, who is part-hunting dog, part-Shepherd, comes out for a lick and a cuddle. Animal lovers will be in heaven here: later I meet two more dogs, Medo and Arya, as well as cats Risto, Risto Junior and Maggie. All are gentle and affectionate (yes, even the cats).

I settle into my light-filled ensuite apartment, one of two available to guests. Once a barn, it features a balcony from which

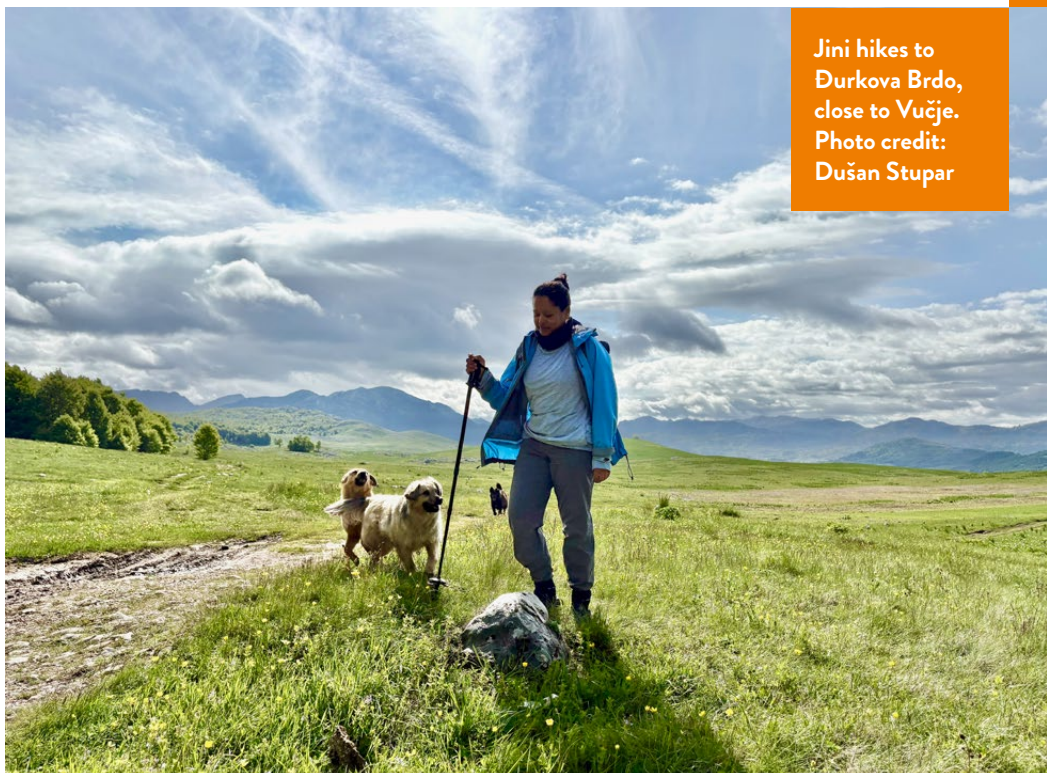
to enjoy the views of Mount Njegoš. 'I'll leave you to settle in', says my host. 'No rush'.

It's rare to be given free time upon arrival at a retreat and I'm grateful for the opportunity to decompress. An hour later, I head to the rustic, shared community space, a kitchen-cum-lounge, for lunch. Smiling broadly from a sofa is Noelhi, a charming volunteer from Venezuela, who came to Fitcamp via the [Worldpackers](#), a global community site.

'This is my third visit since 2023', she says. 'I help around the farm and on workshops, and do whatever needs doing in exchange for accommodation'. It's worth mentioning that the place is also popular with digital nomads looking for longer stays.

Tucking into scrambled eggs, raw vegetables and thick Montenegrin coffee, I learn that the Fitcamp is home to 17 chickens, including two vocal cockerels and a small permaculture garden. In season, if they fancy it, guests are invited to pick their own veg and prepare meals in the kitchen. Andjela likens conventional agriculture to the situation in Gaza: 'It kills what is already there and native to the soil', she says. She tells me about plans to transition to solar power – here rain is collected for water, food waste is composted – but I'm eager to get moving.

Alas, the yoga session – usually offered on a wood platform in a meadow on the property – is rained out. Instead, I take a stroll on the nearby barefoot trail. Wiggling my toes, I tread gingerly over beach pebbles, pine cones, moss and small sharp stones. I've walked (and written about) barefoot trails before – the practice reconnects you to the earth's natural energies, is a cheap form of reflexology and is a fun playground for feet – but



Jini hikes to Durkova Brdo, close to Vučje. Photo credit: Dušan Stupar

here, the sensory awakening is amplified, not only by the textures underfoot but by the colourful wildflowers, birdsong and the gentle, cleansing rain.

FOOD, BREATH AND NOURISHMENT

At the farmhouse, I return to a table laden with delicious snacks: lentil cookies, slices of fruit and a healthy, homemade Nutella. Balance is everything here and I enjoy a toast with *rakija*, a fruit brandy, here made from local cornelian cherries, a kind of wild berry.

Later in the afternoon, Tamara Miljanic, the warm, kind yoga and meditation teacher offers a pranayama session. Trained in India, she exudes an enviable serenity. Curled up on the terrace on a comfy divan, wrapped in blankets with the flute-like song of a cuckoo ringing out across the valley, I can feel the headache I've been nursing all day evaporate, each inhale and exhale deepening my relaxation.

Before dinner, there's a session with Biljana Gajic, the team's holistic nutritionist. 'Nutrition isn't just about calories and vitamins', she says. 'It's anything we absorb from the outside: nature, breath, the environment, water, the energy we take in from people and situations, the books we read, the media we consume – all of these things can nourish us (or not) and impact on our wellbeing'.

Later, Biljana reveals that she was inspired to eat more healthily when she cured herself of hormonal imbalances through diet. 'Standard medicine only worsened my condition. I began doing my own research and came to see that my symptoms were a form of communication, and I discovered the healing power of food'.

Dinner, which Biljana helped to prepare, is a simple but delicious salad and some local cheeses. Impressively, I'm told the names of the families who make them! I ask Biljana what is in the divine dressing: 'A handful of cashews, sunflower seeds, soy sauce, lemon, garlic, salt, water and a bit of ginger', she says, and I make a mental note to try it at home.

HIKES, HEARTS AND MOUNTAIN AIR

In the morning, the sun is shining and it's time for a bit of *shinrin-yoko*, Montenegro-style – a walk on the Fitcamp's kilometre-long heart trail, accompanied by the dogs, who are clearly delighted at the outing. Trees and stones on the trail are painted with red hearts – another cue to be mindful. There are wildflowers everywhere, and it dawns on me how much their glorious mauves, purples, yellows and pinks lift my spirits.

All too soon, my stay at Fitcamp comes to an end: it's time to head deeper into the mountains. Andjela's friend Andja is eager for me to experience proper hiking and some more traditional Montenegrin fare, so I head to Vučje, the traditional lodge that she owns. It's in the heart of the Dinaric mountains, further to the east. The peaks are camouflaged by the surrounding woods, and in the blazing sunshine, my first impression is of a mellow alpine meadow and space to breathe. People come here in winter to ski, but on a late spring day, it's quiet and peaceful.

The food here is far from the usual retreat fare – it's

creamy and meat- and fish-based (though vegetarians are catered for too), but I'm in slow food territory and everything is locally sourced, produced and prepared with love. Flexibility of spirit, I remind myself, is part of wellbeing too.

In the morning, after gorging myself on moorish fritters with rose-hip jam, I head for a hike to Đurkova Brdo, a small peak. Enisa and Dušan are my wonderful guides, kind and empathetic. Dušan tells me it's 'snake season' and I remind myself that snakes need a place to call home too (Montenegro has three species of venomous snake, but you're unlikely to see them). Atop the Đurkova Brdo – there's a ski lift to get up – I feast on 360-degree views of the mountains.

Later, the pair drive me to Lukavica, further east still – a land of sharp peaks, ridges and pastures, unspoilt and wild. A single winding road leads us through the hauntingly beautiful mountain plateau, and I feel as though I've wandered into a scene from *The Lord of the Rings*. Dušan points to the 1900-metre peak, Mali Žurim. It looks impossibly steep.

'Next time you come, we can hike it. It's easier than it looks', Dušan says encouragingly. The land I'm in feels sacred, the silence potent, the air crisp and cool. In the gloom, the peaks appear brooding and a lone white-tailed deer bobs away in the distance.

THE BEAUTY OF STILLNESS

On my last day, I head to the sun-drenched Jablan Winery, a family-run organic wine producer in the sleepy village of Rvaši where you can rent apartments and sign up for wine-tastings. I spy the e-bikes available to guests and leap on for what must rate as the most dizzyingly beautiful ride of my life, down hairpin bends to Lake Skadar.

It's a protected National Park – the biggest in southeast Europe – and a paradise for birds. The views of the serpentine Rijeka Crnojevića, a river and canyon within the lake system, are sublime. On a boat trip on the peaceful lake, I spy a pygmy cormorant diving for fish, and a heron in flight. If beauty is medicine for the soul, then mine is singing. Montenegro has been a revelation. ●

Find out more...

- A five-night [Yoga Getaway at FitCamp Montenegro](#) is available on request from May to November, and costs €900 per person. Full board is available, and car rentals, airport pick-up and trips to the local grocery can all be organised.
- Bed and breakfast at [Vučje](#) costs €37.10 per person per night. Hiking tours cost from €50 per person.
- [Jablan Winery's](#) five-bedroom [stonehouse](#) costs £46 (€55) per night. The [studio](#) costs from £42 (€50) per night. Both stays are self-catering and based on a minimum two-night stay. A bike, wine and boat trip costs from €130 per person.



LEFT: Jini on a bike ride to Lake Skadar
RIGHT: Rijeka Crnojevića river and canyon
Photo credit: Lizet Wesselman



ENJOY TWO DELICIOUS RECIPES,
SHARED STRAIGHT FROM THE TEAM
AT FITCAMP MONTENEGRO...

LENTIL COOKIES

Makes: 10 to 12 cookies

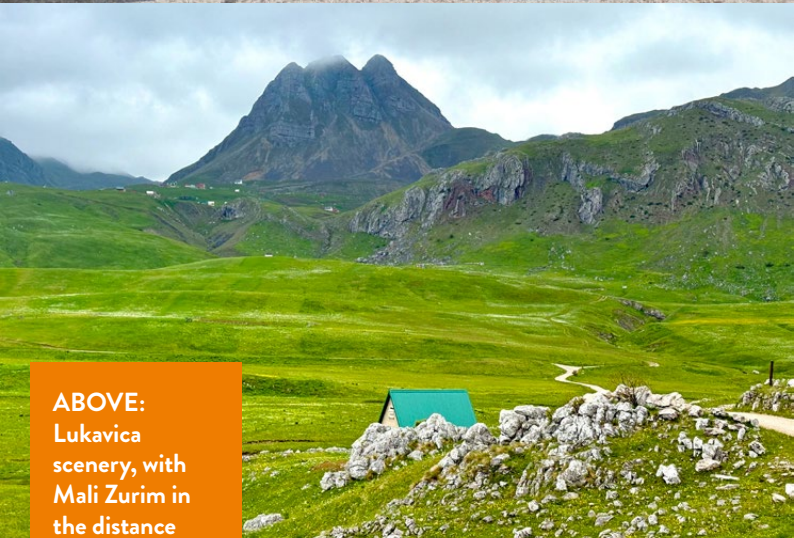
- ✦ 1 cup of red lentils
- ✦ 20g Psyllium husk
- ✦ Pinch of salt
- ✦ Small plug of olive oil
- ✦ ½ tsp baking soda

1. Soak lentils overnight in water.
2. In the morning, drain water and add Psyllium husk, salt, olive oil and baking soda to the lentil mixture.
3. Mix in a blender before using a spoon to shape the cookies. Bake in the oven at 200°C (180°C fan) for 15 to 20 minutes.

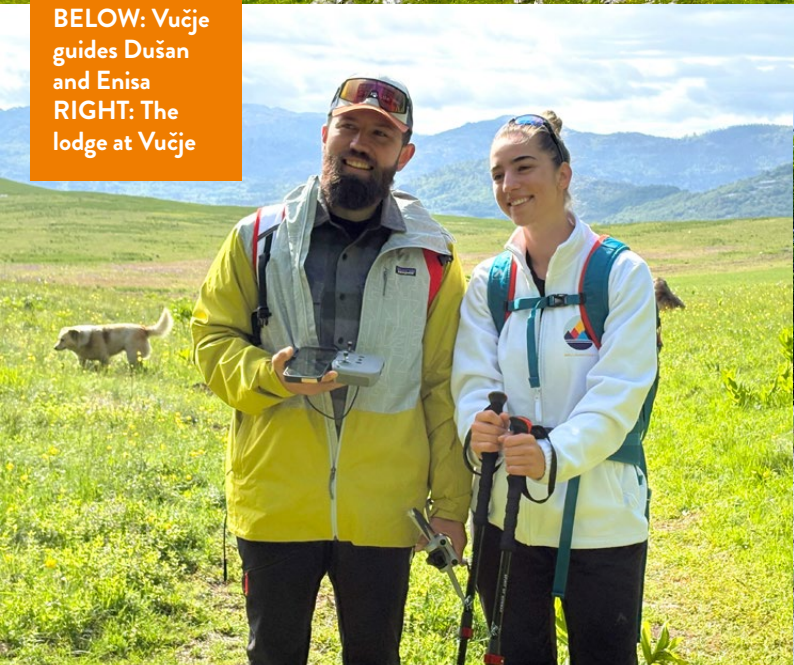
HOME-MADE NUTELLA

- ✦ 200g hazelnuts
- ✦ 200g dates
- ✦ 1 cup plant milk
- ✦ Cocoa powder and cinnamon for flavour

1. Mix all the ingredients together in a blender before putting in the refrigerator.
2. Use within seven days. The dip is delicious with slices of apple, or as a spread.



ABOVE:
Lukavica
scenery, with
Mali Zurim in
the distance
BELOW: Vučje
guides Dušan
and Enisa
RIGHT: The
lodge at Vučje



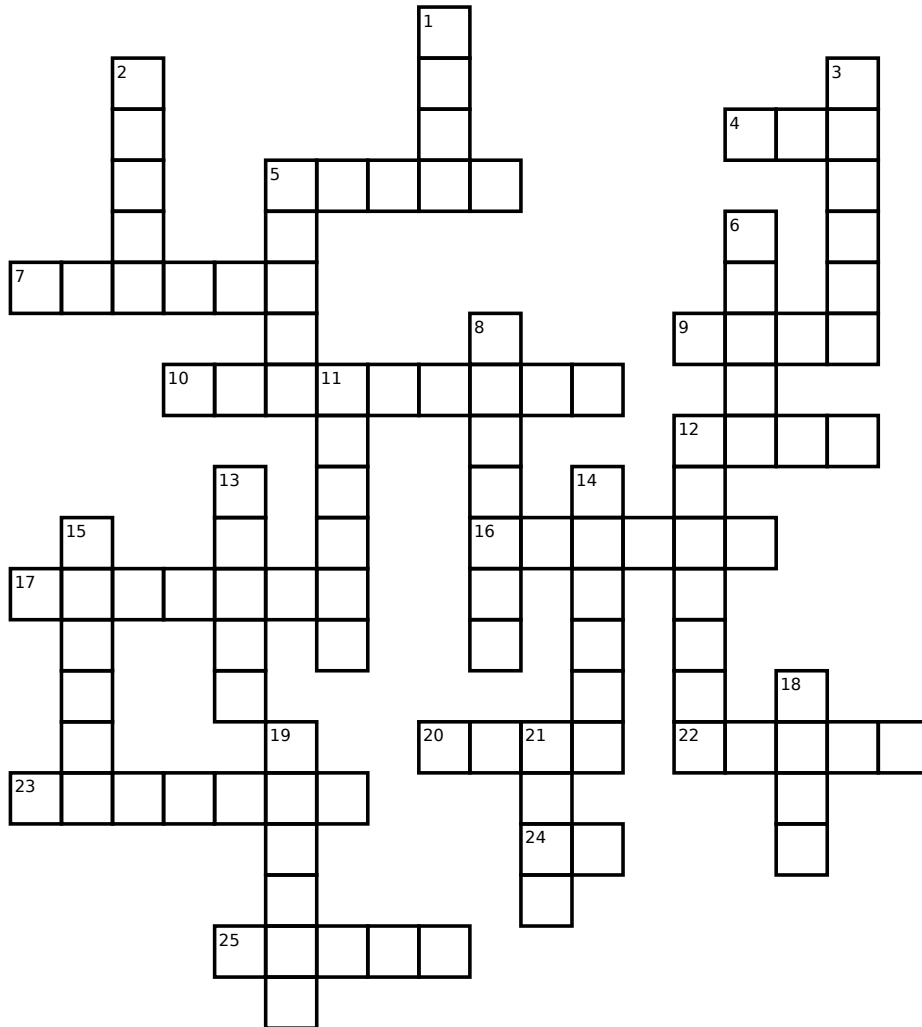
Create

Use this page to colour, create, and let your imagination flow



Crossword

Flex your mind and connect the clues with a retreat-themed crossword



Down:

- 1 The energetic field said to surround the body (4)
- 2 Bring body, mind and energy into harmony (5)
- 3 Focused energy behind a ritual or action (6)
- 5 Repetitive singing or speaking to shift vibration (5)
- 6 Radiant energy said to flow through the chakras (5)
- 8 Gentle yoga practice that combines slow postures and breath awareness (3,4)
- 11 That which is revered, holy, or spiritually significant (6)
- 12 A powerful tool for insight, clarity and presence (7)
- 13 Element linked with intuition and emotional flow (5)
- 14 Often lit to set sacred space or intention (6)
- 15 Connect with the earth for stability (6)
- 18 Rhythmic instrument often used in shamanic practice (4)
- 19 A sacred space for devotion or reflection (6)
- 21 A cosy place to read a book (4)

Across:

- 4 A meditative state of simplicity and awareness (3)
- 5 A tasty plant medicine ceremony traditionally hailing from South America (5)
- 7 A written or spoken phrase repeated in spiritual practice (6)
- 9 Mineral used in cleansing rituals and bathing (4)
- 10 A naturally warm pool, often found near volcanic activity (3,6)
- 12 One who guides with wisdom, not just knowledge (4)
- 16 A person or tool used to receive divine guidance (6)
- 17 A conscious act to calm the body and mind (7)
- 20 When the moon does this, it's the perfect time to ritually release and reflect (4)
- 22 It symbolises stability, grounding and support (5)
- 23 A symbolic or spiritual inner journey (7)
- 24 A healing sound, often used in mantra meditation (2)
- 25 A state of pure joy and inner peace (5)

Word Pyramid

Can you make it from top to bottom in our cryptic pyramid puzzle?

- 1 The self – your unique spiritual presence
- 2 Being present within, the sacred inner space
- 3 A quick, small squeeze or bite – like awareness catching you
- 4 Longing for growth and deeper connection
- 5 An inner support and channel for energy
- 6 Spiritual growth matures and comes to fruition?
- 7 Awaken and breathe life into your highest self

- ✦ Begin at the top of the pyramid with a one-letter word.
- ✦ At each level, add one new letter to the previous word and rearrange the letters to form a new word.
- ✦ Use the clues to help you discover each word along the way.
- ✦ Can you make it all the way through the pyramid?

Create

Use this page to colour, create, and let your imagination flow



Wordsearch

Train your brain and unwind with our wordsearch

U	E	U	E	O	D	J	H	H	N	R	E	V	I	R
G	C	B	O	C	E	O	T	O	S	A	T	N	C	O
F	N	W	K	E	R	A	W	R	K	D	T	O	V	A
C	E	G	X	A	C	P	O	I	E	Z	M	U	E	F
T	S	V	C	N	A	V	R	Z	R	M	N	T	R	P
B	E	P	A	C	S	E	G	O	U	N	P	T	R	E
U	R	I	L	U	I	E	Z	N	T	B	E	A	C	H
T	P	E	M	K	C	R	I	B	N	S	I	G	Z	K
R	S	R	A	N	E	T	Z	J	E	X	W	M	C	K
G	P	E	A	T	Y	Z	O	R	V	E	H	O	I	C
L	Z	L	R	H	H	U	A	O	D	J	M	K	D	H
C	A	E	T	O	R	N	V	W	A	M	Y	O	G	A
B	A	H	V	N	F	U	E	T	A	T	I	D	E	M
T	O	S	A	L	A	D	M	H	I	K	I	N	G	U
H	N	L	M	O	U	N	T	A	I	N	S	M	M	F

Find the listed search terms in the grid. They may appear horizontally, vertically or diagonally, forwards or backwards.

Adventure
Balance
Beach
Breath
Calm
Community
Escape

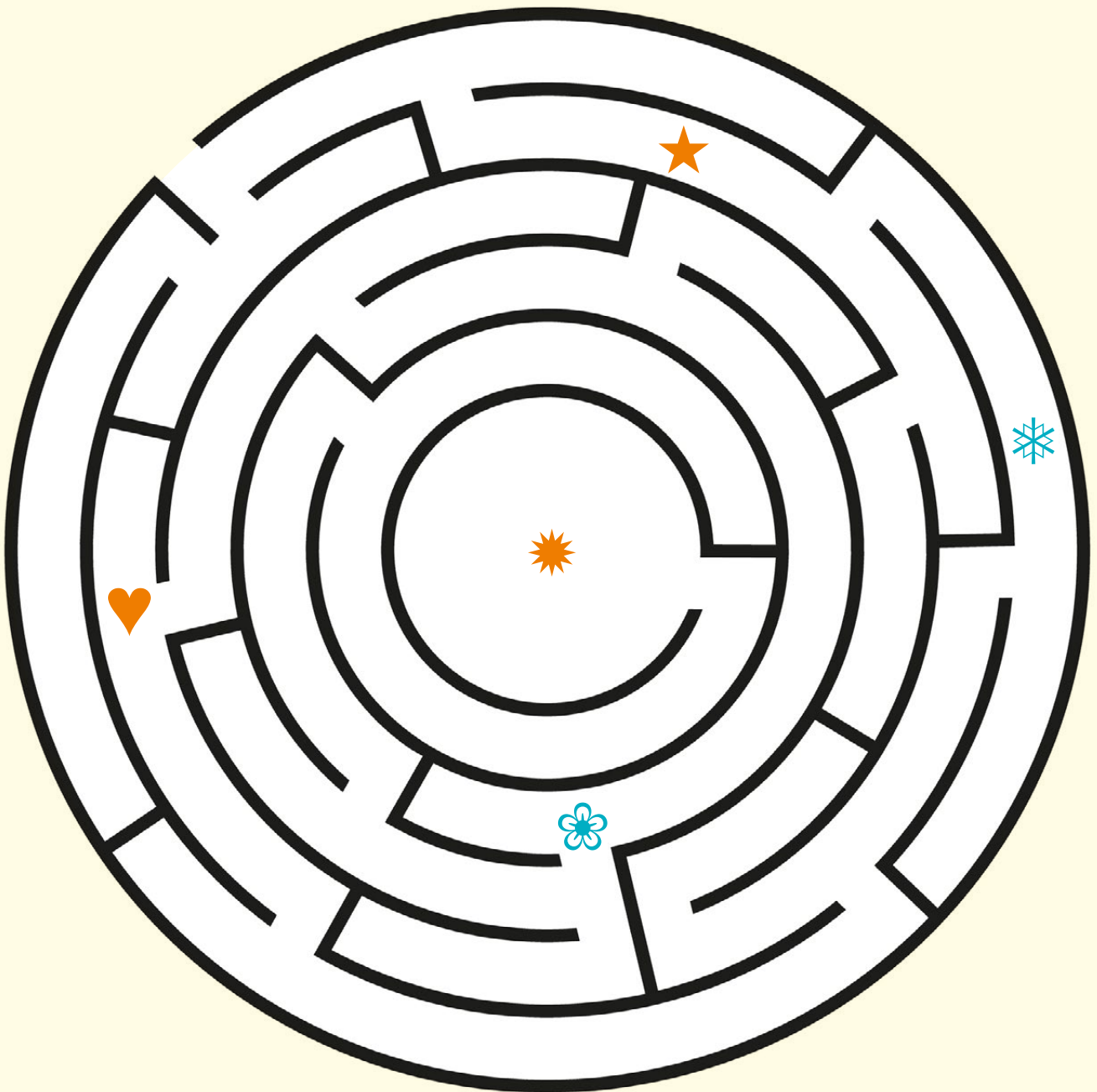
Forest
Growth
Hammock
Hiking
Horizon
Journal
Meditate

Mountains
Nature
Ocean
Presence
Reset
Retreat
River

Reset
Ocean
Presence
Sacred
Tea
Yoga

Gratitude Maze

Journey inwards, one grateful thought at a time, with our mindful maze



Follow the path from start to finish, tracing the path with your finger.
As you go, pause at each symbol to reflect on something you're grateful for – small, big, recent or long-standing.

- ★ Something that gives you hope
- ❄️ Something small you're grateful for
- ♥️ Something that makes you feel loved
- 🌸 Something that's helping you grow
- 🔥 Something that lights your inner fire

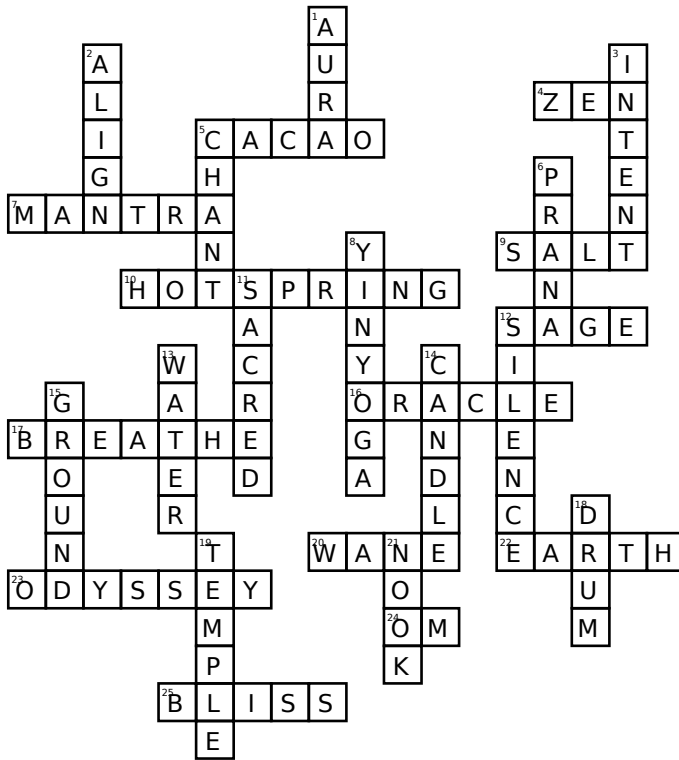
Create

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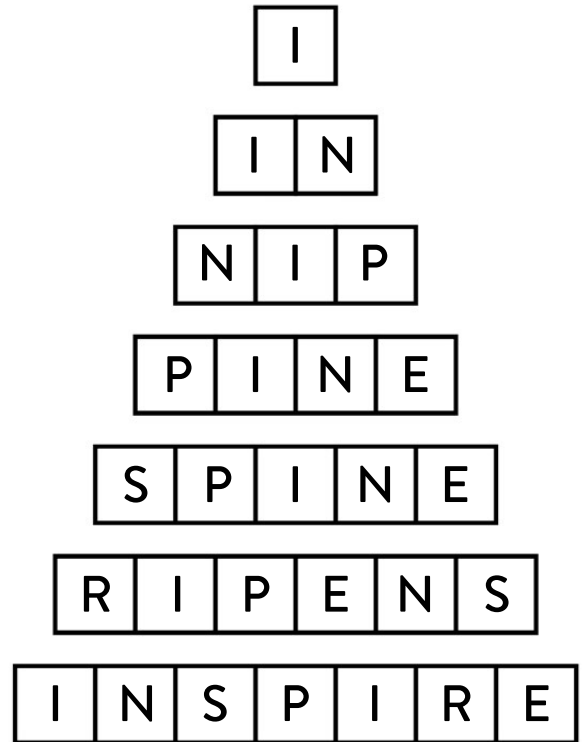


Solutions

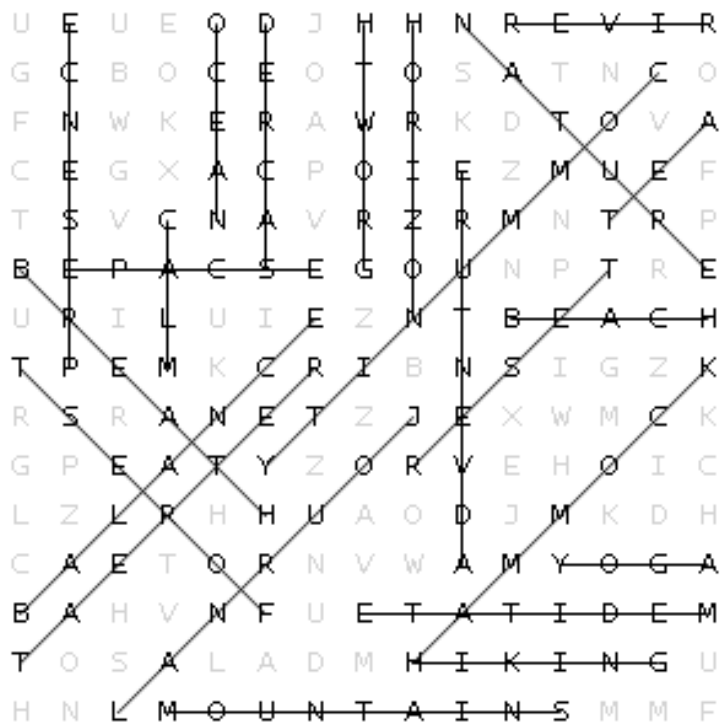
Crossword, p37



Word pyramid, p38



Wordsearch, p40



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