

Travel

## Make moves and chill: Eight gorgeous yoga retreats to escape to this winter

Gemma Tipton stretches body and mind at the Burren Yoga Retreat centre, and discovers other great yoga holidays around Ireland and abroad

Expand



A yoga class at the Burren Yoga Retreat centre; Photograph: David Brocklebank

Gemma Tipton

Sun Oct 16 2022 - 06:00



I was so stressed the night before my week-long yoga retreat, I had an anxiety dream. I wasn't alone. While mine involved being hoodwinked into sharing a prison-like chamber with loads of dirty strangers, plus a certain degree of upset screaming, I soon discovered one of my fellow yogis had something similar. Her dream included an unexpected dorm and a lack of bathroom facilities.

We shouldn't have worried. Recently refurbished, the [Burren Yoga Retreat centre](#) has lots of lovely single and double en suite bedrooms; so while you can save money by sharing a bathroom, or booking a dorm, it's definitely not obligatory. Stress can do funny things to a person, and one of its more insidious tricks involves making you believe it's dangerous to relax. I'm sure there's a deep evolutionary reason, dating back to when we were living in caves and trying not to be eaten by wolves, but it's less useful in the 21st century.

According to the glamping pod gurus at [Further Space](#), the average person has 60,000 thoughts a day, and they can only settle when we slow down and unwind. Being in nature helps, but you have to remember to pause, breathe deep and soak it all in. I was halfway through a walk in the enchanted Burren woodlands (that may or may not have inspired JRR Tolkien to write *The Lord of the Rings*), before I realised I was so stuck in my head, I hadn't actually noticed how gorgeous they were.



Burren Yoga Retreat

It took me a good few days to let go. By day three I realised that “achieving relaxation” might not be the best way of going about things and that there is a great deal to be said for just settling in and going with the flow. By day four, my face had changed, grim lines soothed into something softer — to which an amazing massage by Devatara Ní Fhinn has definitely contributed. Owner and director David Brocklebank tells us the centre has been blessed by llamas. It is also surrounded by sheep and cows whose bleats and moos infuse our twice-daily meditation sessions.

Surrounded by all this beauty, retreats at the centre vary depending on what you’re in the market for. You can do boot camps, if you so desire, but we’re signed up for yin-inspired Hatha yoga with Niamh Daly, which is excessively lovely. “Have you done restorative yoga?” Daly asks on our first evening. “No? You are in for such a treat,” she says happily.

Restorative yoga turns out to involve discovering hugely comfortable positions and cuddling bolsters. Nidra yoga is similar, but as Daly informs us, it also includes “me saying nice things to you”. Having endured plenty of pulled muscles and sweaty aching during my occasional forays into weekend yoga classes, I’m delightfully surprised. In fact, the kind of yoga-for-keep-fit so many of us do in this part of the world is actually a relatively recent import, via Swedish gymnastics, Daly says.



Gemma Tipton at Burren Yoga Retreat

I look it up to discover that back in 1949, Indian yogi Shyam Sundar Goswami visited Sweden and made a sort of a spiritual movement mash-up with Pehr Henrik Ling's system of physical jerks. That's not to imply that exercise is absent from Daly's classes, it's just more of a byproduct of a way of relearning to inhabit your body, move with grace and intention, making the most of some too-long-ignored muscles and always, always remembering to breathe.

It's amazing how quickly we fall into a routine. Mornings start at 8am with meditation and yoga until 10am. Weirdly, you're expected to achieve this uncaffeinated, but even though I have decided to throw myself fully into the experience, there are limits. Fortunately, the dining room has a coffee dock and fruit bowl, so what passes for equilibrium is restored.

Daly also has a career as an actor. Fans of *Fair City* will recall her as Debbie O'Brien, mother of Katy (of kidnapped Katy-in-a-box fame). As her storylines were usually pretty grim and miserable, I ask her for a quick burst of "anguish". She instantly obliges, cracking us all up. Daly is a brilliant teacher. Our group ranges from beginner to experienced, stiff to bendy, and 30-something to over 70, but Daly is able to make sure we all get everything we need from each session.



Burren Yoga Retreat

Finally, it's time for breakfast, where there is a wonderful array of fruits, free-range eggs, breads, cereals and more epically necessary coffee. Retreats are alcohol-free and the food is vegetarian and inspiringly delicious. Still, as we gel as a group we all agree that dinner of beans, nuts and pulses followed by yoga and stretching isn't quite as relaxing as it should be. "Digestively challenging" is a more accurate description perhaps, although I do discover some more unfrequented muscle groups as I try to refrain from interrupting the silence of evening meditation.

After yoga each day we head out to explore the beautiful Burren. We scramble over limestone pavements, swim at the Flaggy Shore made famous by Seamus Heaney's perfect poem Postscript (etched on to a handy sign nearby) and those who feel up to it climb Mullaghmore. Another sunny day, we swim in Lough Bunny, where the water streams like silk in front of me, and if it wasn't for the arctic cold as I get to a deeper darker spot, I would have stayed in till teatime.

There is no phone coverage or wifi at the retreat centre, and it is incredible how quickly the urge to "just check something on email" evaporates when you physically can't. The whole digital detox aspect is slightly marred by Brocklebank popping in to ask if he can film us for Instagram. It's an unwelcome reminder of a world I'm anxious to ignore, if only for a few days; although I can see how after the Covid hiatus, every little helps when it comes to spreading the word.



Gemma Tipton at Burren Yoga Retreat

He shouldn't be so anxious. Billed as offering "luxurious simplicity", the centre is very special. The new refurb means it's still a little shiny and new in feeling, and some touches, such as a few extra-soft furnishings and nice Burren-ey pictures in the rooms, are still to come. The grounds are in the process of being done over to include covered seating areas and an outside yoga spot. Wandering to the car park to dig out a raincoat one day, I come across boxes of stone Buddhas, no doubt soon to be plonked in various thickets.

I leave at the end of the week determined to keep up the practices of sitting in quiet, letting my thoughts settle and of stretching in creative ways. It won't last, I know it won't. But as I drive away from the beautiful, beautiful Burren and a group of new friends it was a pure pleasure to spend time with, for a little while, I really and truly believe it will.

Retreats start at €570 in a shared room for two nights, to €1,590 in a super-king en suite room for six nights. Breakfast, dinner and yoga sessions included.