

TRAVEL

Pause for thought: Burren Yoga Retreat review

A weekend retreat in Co Galway turns out to be a welcome, alcohol-free digital detox that inspires its guests to integrate yoga and meditation into daily life, says Valerie Flynn



Valerie Flynn | Monday July 11 2022, 12.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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Who actually goes on all these yoga retreats? There are at least 20 yoga centres dotted around Ireland — part of a global industry with India at its core, of course — with options everywhere else too, from the Arctic Circle to the beaches of Zanzibar. Particularly large concentrations can be found in the playgrounds of wealthy westerners; Bali and Ibiza have loads (and visitors to the Balearic island should “expect soothing crystal singing bowl therapy and sound baths”, a recent listicle in this newspaper even advised).

A large body of scientific evidence demonstrates that yoga improves strength, flexibility and mental health, as well as relieving stress. To date science has not established a definitive link between the practice and increased forbearance towards crystal singing bowl therapy or any other subsidiary woo-woo, although my own firmly held hypothesis is that this link absolutely exists. But even after ten years of yoga classes, I’m vaguely anxious I may not have built up a strong enough tolerance for a full-blown retreat. What if we have to listen to that terrible, ambiguously “ethnic” music? Bad enough for an hour-long class, intolerable over an entire weekend.

Thankfully there are no crystal dreamcatchers nor Ultimate Pan Pipes Collection playlists at the Burren Yoga Retreat Centre, a modern building about ten minutes outside Kinvarra in Co Galway. Built in 2020, although a centre has been at this location since 1999, the building is comfortable and warm, with underfloor heating and excellent soundproofing in the bedrooms. The owners are seeking planning permission for solar panels to reduce the complex's climate impact. The yoga studio is on the first floor, with floor-to-ceiling windows on three sides providing gorgeous views over the whorled hills of the Burren.



A surf lesson on Fanore beach
DAVE BROCKLEBANK

But we're here for the serious business of yoga-retreating and there are rules. No shoes indoors. No alcohol, even when we go to the pub for lunch on Saturday. As a "digital device-free environment" there is no wi-fi, phone reception or 3G. It's not clear if this is due to the remote location or if signal blockers have been deployed. Either way, I freak out within minutes of arrival and accidentally drop my phone out of the bedroom window while desperately trying to get some signal, precious signal. Other guests can be spotted over the course of the weekend sneaking around in their contraband shoes to wave their phones at the ether in similarly deranged fashion. Clearly we all need to be taken in hand.

On arrival on Friday night, the guests — from all walks of life and ranging in age from the thirties to the sixties — meet over a dinner of chipotle-flavoured chilli with vegan sour cream, roast onions and potatoes. The food (all vegetarian) is plentiful and excellent, cooked by the chefs Ida Blazek, Siobhan Joyce and Paddi Keane using vegetables from Beechlawn Organic Farm in Ballinasloe. There are a lot of fermented (non-alcoholic) drinks and vegetables over the course of the weekend; to aid digestion, apparently.

At an introductory meeting after dinner David Brocklebank, the centre's owner, explains that the goal is to help guests to bring home yoga and meditation practices they can incorporate into their daily lives. Brocklebank and Margarida Tree, our teacher for the weekend, speak about the benefit of daily practice, even for a few minutes, and the connection between yoga and meditation.

Afterwards Brocklebank tells me all the teachers on the centre's roster must practise and teach meditation, the "cornerstone of yoga" and have a high level of training. He believes that over the past 20 years yoga teacher training courses have deteriorated, becoming shorter in duration and commercial in focus, and admitting trainers and trainees who do not have a sufficient standard of yoga to begin with. He is particularly critical of the fact that "many of the trainers don't practise meditation".



These criticisms, in particular the idea that yoga — culturally appropriated and commodified in the West — has been stripped of much that is essential to it, leaving only a faddish exercise regime, will intuitively feel correct to many people who attend yoga classes. I have always found the “focus on your breath” stuff that bookends most yoga classes impossible (as I suspect many people do) and usually end up focusing instead on whether we have enough milk or if I should go to the shops on the way home, etc. In my defence this element of the standard yoga class is often haphazard and tokenistic, with far less instruction and emphasis placed on it than on the physical element. So I’m grateful for the opportunity to give meditation a proper shot this weekend. Having missed two motorway exits on the drive down because I was bored and couldn’t concentrate, I suspect I would probably benefit from some mindfulness.

The guests (a maximum of 16 attend each retreat) are invited to speak about their reasons for attending; in my group these include trying yoga for the first time or wanting to get back to it after falling out of the habit during lockdown. I’m surprised by the high proportion of beginners — an immersive weekend seems like a hardcore way to try something for the first time. I know the clue is in the name but there really is a lot of yoga at this thing — seven sessions between Friday and Sunday, including half an hour of meditation and almost 90 minutes of physically intensive vinyasa yoga before breakfast each day.

After breakfast on Saturday we take a strenuous walk up Abbey Hill, overlooking Galway Bay, in glorious sunshine. Brocklebank shows us some of the Burren's famous flora in its early summer glory, including purple orchids and the landscape's iconic spring gentian. On the centre's longer retreats outings also include Mullaghmore mountain, Fanore beach and the 7th-century St Colman's cave, where the hermit lived for seven years, meditating in divine ecstasy (presumably he was device-free too).

Yoga sessions in the afternoon and evening are gentler, focused on relaxation, breathing and meditation.



A guided walk in the Burren
DAVE BROCKLEBANK

I can see how all levels could take something useful from Tree's meticulous and inspiring instruction, and classes are at a slow enough pace for everyone to focus on getting the most from each pose. There is also a question and answer session on the final morning.

Heading home on Sunday afternoon, I can't say I feel immediately transformed by my excessively healthy weekend of yoga and hiking and weird fermented food; mostly I just feel a bit tired. But I've been inspired to try to keep up the habit of rolling out my mat daily for five minutes of focused breathing and ten minutes of stretching, and after a few days I notice a difference. I'm calmer, more patient, better able to focus on one task at a time, better able to let things go when they don't go my way. So if equipping people to integrate yoga and meditation into their daily lives is the Burren Yoga Retreat's goal, then it's mission accomplished, and I feel grateful.

*Valerie Flynn was a guest of Burren Yoga Retreat. A weekend retreat,
staying in an en suite single room, costs from €560pp;
burrenyoga.com*