



# Spiritual retreats

# Waiting to exhale

Some of the most peaceful getaways are in our backyard, writes **Erin O'Dwyer**.

**A**nother evening yoga session over. "This time," I say to my teacher. "This time, I'll really do it. Be committed and do it." She nods and smiles, as she always does. I know she'd believe me if I believed myself. But how hard is it to do an hour a day of yoga?

Tougher than you would think. By week's end, I'm slipping back into my old routine – sleeping in, quaffing wine and breaking my self-imposed vegetarian regimen. The spirit is willing but my body is weak. And weary. And stiff. And sore.

How to balance body and soul is one of the dilemmas of our time. Life's vicissitudes invade us and, even when we can get away from it all, mobile phones, BlackBerries and wireless internet make us available. The way to really tune in is to take time off. A weekend is good; a week is better. A month or three is best.

There is no shortage of sacred sites to help you reconnect: take part in an ancient Inca sunrise ceremony at Machu Picchu; live with Buddhist monks in monasteries in Myanmar; learn yoga from gurus in the Himalayas. Yet some of the best spiritual getaways are in our own backyard. And if the best kind of travel is all about the journey, then this kind of spirituality travel is all about the journey within.

## Insight meditation

Less than two hours' drive from Sydney is the Vipassana Meditation Centre in the Blue Mountains. Dhamma Bhumi offers 10-day live-in courses in the ancient art of Insight meditation – a process of self-purification by self-observation, beginning by observing the breath to concentrate the mind.

The course is free – the beautiful 16-hectare

bushland centre runs solely on donations – but its requirements are daunting. Would I agree to stay silent for the entire 10 days? Yes. Would I agree to stay until the end? Yes. Would I agree to abstain from eating meat, having sex and drinking alcohol? Yes. Yes. And well, OK, yes.

Each day begins at 4am, with private meditation until 6.30am. Group meditation is conducted three times daily and each evening teachers give hints on various techniques.

Going on a Vipassana retreat is a little like diving into a pool and holding your breath. Peace gives way to panic. Then peace and fear and more panic. But I found an inner calm I did not know I had. It was hard to leave my books, laptop and mobile phone behind. But I have been back twice. The key messages are go back to the breath, remain equanimous – and this too will pass. Messages applicable in daily life

## Power yoga retreat

For those who like their spirituality hot, this is a seven-day "hot yoga" retreat with instructor Duncan Peak. Spending even a day with Peak is like watching all three *Mad Max* movies back to back. A former officer in the Australian Army's 3RAR parachute regiment, Peak is effortlessly good looking, rippling with brawn and prepared to pummel your body to a pulp while charming you with his boyish laugh. After three days, you are hoisting the white flag. After five days, you are crying: "Oh, God, make him stop." After seven days, you and your "downward dog" have never looked so good.

I arrive at the retreat, at Otford, south of Sydney, expecting a crowd of buff, body-beautiful fitness freaks from Peak's Power





Vinyasa yoga studio in Neutral Bay. Instead, I find a mix of experienced and novice devotees there to refresh and rejuvenate – just like me. From day one, then, I am forced to confront the prejudices I have about myself and others.

Peak's course is about much more than yoga. Billed as Bootcamp for the Soul, each day starts with a silent bushwalk followed by an hour of pranayama (yogic breathing) and meditation. Later, there will be two yoga sessions – fast-paced and in a heated studio – taught in the tradition of Baron Baptiste's Power Vinyasa yoga. Assistant teachers make constant adjustments to your poses and individual poses are slowed right down so that even experienced yogis go back to basics.

Evenings are spent in life-skills sessions. But don't panic. It's less about personal development and more about the inner journey. How does one let go of anger and fear to find the way towards compassion and love?

All this soul searching makes me hungry and I find the highlight is the vegetarian menu. The camp's kitchen, at Otford's Govinda Valley Spiritual Retreat, is run by Hare Krishnas so each meal is cooked on ayurvedic principles. In short, food is medicine and medicine is food. You'll emerge feeling fabulous inside and out.

## Ashram life, work included

By far the best way to immerse yourself in spiritual life is to sign up for an ashram stay. Satyananda Yoga, near Mangrove Creek, on the Central Coast, offers the chance to live in a spiritual community – stay for one month or up to four but be prepared to work hard.

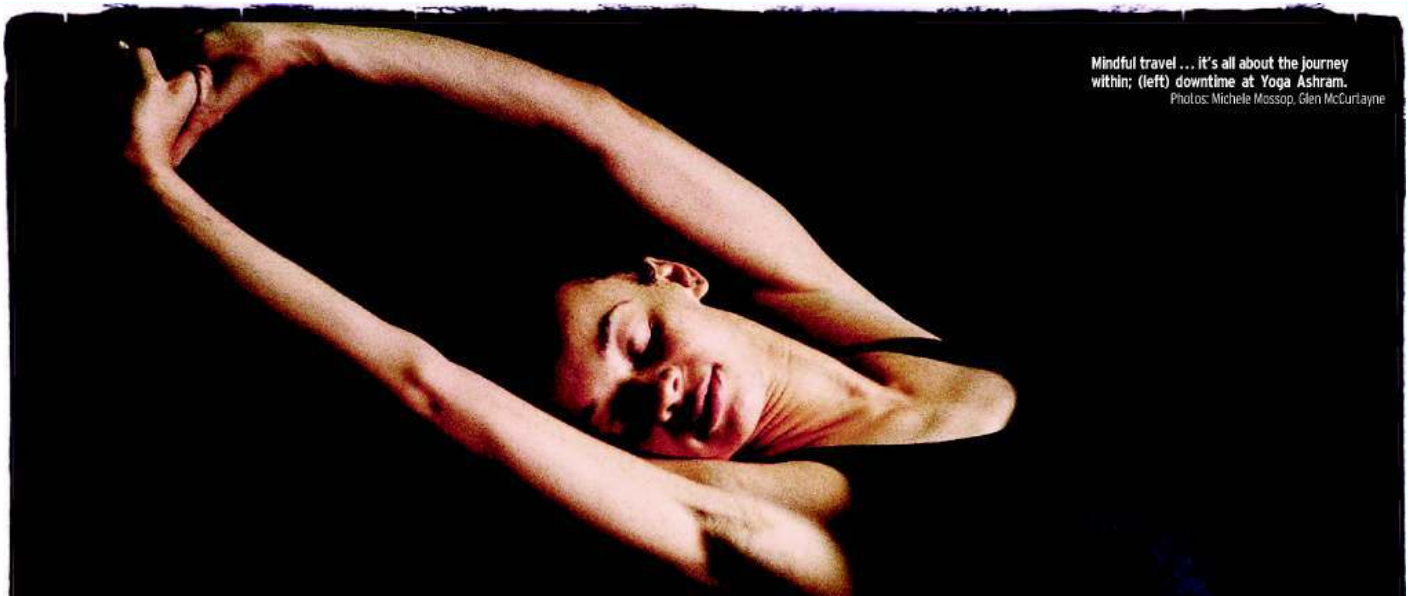
Living in a community is also about contributing, so you will need to pitch in with building work, cooking, gardening or administration.

Each day starts at 5.30am and ends at 8.30pm. The program is built around Satyananda yoga sessions – a blend of Hatha, Raja, Karma, Jnana, Mantra and Bhakti yogas.

Classes are available in meditation and chanting, with time for creative pursuits such as knitting and weaving, drumming and strumming. Meals are vegetarian and organic, with ingredients grown mostly on the property. Families are welcome.

"The ashram at Mangrove Mountain is a place where my children and I feel deeply nourished and cared for," one participant says

*The writer was a guest of Power Living Yoga Retreat.*



Mindful travel... it's all about the journey within; (left) downtime at Yoga Ashram.  
 Photos: Michele Mossop, Glen McCurtayne

## > TRIP NOTES

■ Vipassana Meditation Centre, 202 Station Street, Blackheath. Phone (02) 4787 7436, see [bhumi.dhamma.org](http://bhumi.dhamma.org).

■ Power Living Yoga Retreat, held at Govinda Valley Spiritual Retreat, Otford, one hour's drive south of Sydney. Also, daily yoga classes at the Power Living studio, 135 Military Road, Neutral Bay.

Phone (02) 9904 4874, see [powerliving.com.au](http://powerliving.com.au) for both the retreat and daily classes.

■ Satyananda Yoga Mangrove, 300 Mangrove Creek Road, Mangrove Creek. Written applications to stay required. Phone (02) 4377 1171, see [satyananda.net](http://satyananda.net).