

Me Time

With a heavy heart, a busy television presenter leaves her family behind to indulge in rest and relaxation at a Byron Bay retreat – and embraces a new outlook on life

BY CARLY FLYNN



I reckon if you asked any mother of small children what their dream escape would be, it would entail two common themes – uninterrupted sleep and relaxation. Throw in some gentle exercise (yoga, walking, biking), meditation, incredible food, a group of like-minded women, and a new challenge outside of your comfort zone (surfing), and Janine Hall's Escape Haven Byron Bay is the ultimate retreat.

The email invitation to join Hall at Byron drops out of the sky like a letter from heaven. A tired working mum of two, I've never been away from my littlies overnight, let alone overseas. But this opportunity was too good to pass up, so it was decided I would leave my very capable husband with our two wee ones – Tilly, two and a half, and one-year-old Jude – and escape.

The excitement I feel about my impending departure mounts and I am the envy of my mummy friends.

I can't remember what it is like to wake up alone and only have to feed, dress and plan for myself. On the day of my flight, the inevitable anxiety and apprehension of leaving my young family rears. I can't comprehend being in another country and away from those who were once as close to me as you can get.

My heavy heart stays with me on the short flight into the Gold Coast, where with a tear in my eye, I watch Kiwi grandparents reunite with grandchildren whose parents have settled across the Tasman.

After a 45-minute drive south to Byron Bay, we have arrived at the retreat. I warn Hall as she warmly moves to welcome me with a hug that I may cry upon receipt. She quickly shares that many mums arrive feeling similar: guilty, frazzled, and teary, but then decide to let it go. Leave it at the door. Enjoy the moment. After all, this is what the retreat is all about. Guilt be gone; let the me time begin. >>



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Hall, a 39-year-old New Zealander has followed through on something I suspect many of us have only ever dreamed of doing – ditched a successful corporate career and set up her dream life in two incredible locations, Bali, and Byron Bay. A new job that allows her not only to enjoy the lifestyle herself day to day, but share it with hundreds of other women too. It hasn't been that straightforward, of course; there have been hurdles and challenges along the way. But the result, her second retreat in three years, is outstanding.

I step inside and realise this is the 'old me' kind of place. Fragrant frangipani trees remind me of my youth growing up in the Cook Islands, crashing waves nearby soothe my distracted mind, and a glass of freshly made juice and plate of cold calamari salad remind me to be thankful and enjoy this delectable moment.

The retreat is in the middle of a rainforest, glass pavilions intertwine with nature, and a private shell path leads you directly to the beautiful bay at Broken Head. There are only 10 properties here in the rainforest, and that is the way it will remain, forever a quiet, secluded, special spot.

We are, at the beginning, seven strangers at the women-only retreat, and we're ushered into the yoga room for our first session within an hour of arriving. It's raining hard on the tin roof, a melodic contribution to the concentration required for what's to come. It's warm though, and I'm ready to lose myself in a downward-facing dog to banish thoughts of what might be going on at home, and focus my mind and my body.

To be honest, I've never really liked yoga. I would like to like it, but I'm just not very good at it. What is there to like about contorting a post-baby body into childlike poses you haven't been able to get into since being an actual child? But this is an essential part of the retreat, and Nicki, a long-limbed, beautifully serene yogi, is patient with us as we grapple with the basics. She tells me, "we are born balanced, but we create imbalance in our lives".

I sleep well that night and wake to the sounds of crashing waves and a cackling kookaburra, a world away from my typical wake-up cry of a tantrum-ing toddler.

I've come here for a full stop in life, to make a fresh start. But over an incredible breakfast of coconut-soaked chia porridge, homemade muesli, fruit compote and a savoury tart, Hall tells us this isn't the time for making plans or life changes. It is simply a place to be. Be mindful. Be present. Be yourself. "Everything is now as it's meant to be," she tells us.

And that is how the week is designed. Enough alone time to clear your mind, and enough distractions to force you to be in the moment. You can't be worrying about home or work as you're balancing on one leg in yoga or on the surfboard; you'd fall flat on your face.

I've never been a natural in the sea. I prefer to float in fresh water than sink in the surf. I get horrible motion sickness. I even had to give up ocean swimming for an event because of it, so I'm less than enthusiastic about surfing, let alone donning a wetsuit.

We're picked up by Surfing Byron Bay owner Serena Adams and photographer Jane Collins, a Cantabrian who went looking for the ultimate year-round surfing climate 20 years ago and found Byron. She tells us "People will say Byron is paradise... and it is!"

I can't remember the last time I tried something new, just for pleasure. It's something we seem to do less as we get older, and busier. A handwritten note left on my pillow the previous night stated, "Life begins at the end of your comfort zone." Today is set to be a testament to that. But Adams' and Collins' passion and enthusiasm is infectious, and after a quick lesson on the sand, we are all popping up on our boards after a couple of waves. I can't wipe the smile from my face. Elated. Happy. At peace. The feeling of being pushed along by the wave is like nothing I've felt before. Pure adrenaline; exhilarating. The hardest part is trekking back out in the current to catch the next one; I can't get there fast enough.

Everywhere I look others seem just as content – a blond ponytailed grandmother in a bikini on a short board; a three-year-old boy popping up next to his grandfather. What a thrill. I now understand the surfing addiction, and want to do more.

An unexpected delight at the retreat is the food: organic, locally sourced, fresh and simply divine. Our cook Mell Thompson clearly loves what she does and is generous with sharing her culinary secrets. She cooks with no sugar, uses nothing processed, and where she can uses her hands to make things with love.

Throughout the week we feast on fresh steamed snapper, handmade lobster ravioli, chunky pumpkin soup, and raw strawberry mousse. If you want to wash it down with alcohol you can, although this costs extra.

Thompson takes us to a local farmers market in nearby Bangalow – a gorgeous wee town full of young families and artisans. I feel like I could live here. We pick up fresh mushrooms for pizza, locally grown coffee beans, and maple toasted macadamia nuts. A cooking lesson with Thompson is restorative. We soak fruit and nuts, whizz them up and add a bit of coconut and cacao



Above: Escape Haven offers the best of both worlds; its luxury pavilions are set in the middle of rain forest, but it's just a short walk down a shell path to the beach, below.



powder. Voilà – the result is pure bliss in a ball. Sweeter than any piece of chocolate but, incredibly, sugar free.

It dawns on me I am surrounded by some of the most passionate and gracious women I've ever met. Each is living their dream and is radiant in doing so. They are happy, at peace, content. I feel very privileged to be in their world.

I get my first chance to be alone one afternoon as the others are whisked off to the first of many spa treatments included in the Escape Haven package. I'm surprised to feel scared and apprehensive. It's time I long for in my own home, but when I do get it there I can cross off lists, get the house ship-shape, cook a meal, and finish jobs without the pint-sized distractions clambering at my feet. Here, there are no jobs to be done, and my monkey mind is working overtime. I don't want to think too much so I pick up a rusty bike from the garage and ride through the waves at low tide. The white froth at the end of each wave caresses my feet as I gaze out at the surfers with a new appreciation, and a longing for their skill.

Our next yoga class is a little easier; this time we're outside, and the kookaburras are laughing at us from the treetops. I stay in my poses for longer, I'm more focused, and I appreciate the beautiful shoulder stretch it provides after a physical morning out on the waves.

I can't think of any woman in my life who wouldn't benefit from this retreat. When do we ever stop to just be ourselves? To feel the sand between our toes or enjoy a long leisurely lunch while making new friends. There is a gentleness, an ease about being here. It's okay to wear your yoga pants to dinner, and go makeup-free. No one will judge.

There are no workshops, for happiness or otherwise. It's not required. The conversations happen naturally, as we get to know one another better – safe in the knowledge you don't have to be anyone but yourself. Here you are not someone's wife, mother, sister or friend. One is simply able to be oneself.

When it's time to leave, I feel at peace; restored, refreshed and more alive. Time free from caffeine, sugar and the difficulties and monotony of everyday family

life have allowed me to grow in so many ways – most of all in my self-assurance. I've gained confidence from learning a new skill, meeting new people, being on my own, and finding what makes me 'me' again. I feel an inner happiness I'd long forgotten.

We are so relaxed at the airport we almost miss our flight. On the plane I am of course looking forward to seeing my wee family, but I'm determined to bring some of this newfound 'relaxedness' into our everyday life.

My reality comes crashing down the following day, as I am parent help at our local crèche with my two children and 25 other under-threes. But there is a new place for patience in my heart, my mind is still, and I have a feeling of warmth, which I try and carry with me through the week.

I wonder if this is what it is like to feel relaxed? I want to hang on to this feeling I found at Escape Haven, so I quickly sign up to a yoga class and a weekly meditation course. I also look through the pantry and ditch the sugar. And I recreate Mell's bliss balls, which all the family lap up.

Escape Haven Byron Bay has had a significant effect on me; my challenge now is to remain that way, and marry it up with busy family life. Collins was right. Byron Bay is paradise, Escape Haven is Heaven, and I'll be back. □

What the locals know

- Go barefoot. When was the last time you used all the bones in your feet, felt the sand or grass beneath your toes? It's an excellent way to connect and be present.
- Be prepared to relax. There will be alone time so embrace it.
- Ditch the phone. If you have to check it, do so just once a day. There can be nothing more important than being there, in the moment.
- Don't give in to FOMO – fear of missing out! But don't hold back from trying a few things on offer either. You might surprise yourself.



Above and right: The retreat is a tonic for the body, with nutritious food and fun, challenging activities like surfing.



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