

TRAVEL & OUTDOORS

Relax. Reset. Renew.

Shoulders tense? Skin sallow? Mind on edge? These wellness retreats will help you kick those winter blahs, indulge in some pampering, and see your life (and colon) in an entirely new way. You can thank me later.

BY **JORDAN BREAL**

ISSUE **APRIL 2015**

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Photographs by Wynn Myers

Relax

*There is nowhere you'll feel more spoiled, more rejuvenated, or more mindlessly blissful than at **Lake Austin Spa Resort.***

Unwinding doesn't usually come naturally to me, but by my second day at Lake Austin Spa Resort I was wearing my robe to dinner. Even the most tightly wound can morph into hard-core hedonists after just a few days at this secluded retreat twenty miles west of the Capitol. The spa's nineteen waterfront acres have been, in past lives, a fish camp, a short-lived nudist colony, a bull-riding school, and the Bermuda Inn Reducing Resort; then, in 1997, two Louisiana State University fraternity brothers bought the property and transformed it into a sanctuary of repose. For years now, discriminating travel experts and publications have rated Lake Austin one of the top destination spas in the world. Not surprisingly, it's also a major splurge: a three-night stay will cost you more than \$1,700. Despite the price, Lake Austin doesn't feel snobby or rarefied, like so many other posh asylums of pleasure, which makes it all the more relaxing. Plus, you get what you pay for.

When I arrived I was given a little light reading: a twenty-page "Making the Most of Your Stay" booklet with descriptions of the hundred-plus spa treatments offered. The variety of activities and amenities available was almost comically overwhelming and my time finite: a Tibetan yoga class or a sculling lesson? A seaweed scrub or a Manuka tapping treatment? How would I choose? It took a full 24 hours to acclimate to my good fortune, but, oh, how I acclimated.

I hiked. I ate lobster ravioli. I lazed by the pool. Every morning, I'd consult the day's schedule and pick one new pursuit to try: tai chi in the "tree house" studio, aqua aerobics in the pool barn, Hydrobiking on the Colorado River (imagine a waterborne stationary bike mounted on two huge bananas that has the turning radius of a semi). One afternoon, I skipped the cooking demonstration by the "cowgirl chef" so I could go to the fitness hoop-dance class but ended up skipping that too in favor of a nap. In the evenings, I'd slip into my thick white robe and powder-blue flip-flops and pad down a long gravel path beneath vine-covered trellises to the 25,000-square-foot spa—which is also open to day guests—to be buffed and kneaded and polished from face to feet. From there, it was off to the dining room for saffron squash risotto or grilled Cornish game hen served with the greens that I'd seen chef Stephane Beaucamp snipping from the garden earlier in the day. Afterward, back in my room, I'd slide into a lavender-scented bath before conking out while watching *Downton Abbey*, which I'd checked out from the front desk.

Though the resort's Wi-Fi signal was strong, I posted nary a tweet or a photo online and barely glanced at my emails. I didn't want to crow about my stay to friends and family stuck slogging through work meetings and rush-hour commutes back in the real world. And I wanted to practice being fully present in the moment, whether I was learning how to make goat-cheese soufflés in the French cooking class or swaying in a hammock under a tree as an equally unperturbed squirrel dropped bits of its snack on my head.

I saved the spa's signature Tour of Texas treatment for my last night. Over the course of two hours, I was exfoliated with a prickly-pear scrub and slathered in agave nectar before being swaddled like a papoose in soft linens, then anointed with warm essential oils and worked like dough by a masseuse who looked as sweet as a schoolteacher and had the hand strength of a steelworker. I retreated, massage drunk, to the famed Blue Room, a sky-hued lounge filled with antique chairs and Moroccan pouf ottomans, to nibble on dried apricots and unsalted almonds before tightening my sash and walking out into the night, under the stars.

After four restful nights, two massages, a dozen gourmet meals, a facial, a pedicure, and even a few tears of joy, I left feeling more disentangled from life's stresses than I've ever been. As it turns out, I *can* put a price on my well-being—and it was worth every penny.

Rates start at \$1,720 for three nights; 1705 S. Quinlan Park Rd, Austin; 512-372-7300, lakeaustin.com

Also check out:

Espa at the Joule Hotel, Dallas. Descend into this swanky subterranean spa to be massaged with volcanic stones and slathered with the signature pink hair-and-scalp mud. *1530 Main, 214-748-1300, thejouledallas.com/esp*

Trellis at the Houstonian Hotel, Houston. Just a few miles from the Galleria, this 17,000-square-foot oasis has an idyllic courtyard and an indoor pool. *111 N. Post Oak Ln, 713-685-6790, houstonian.com/thespa.aspx*

Travaasa, Austin. Expect all-organic products, a long list of activities, and plenty of quiet at this all-inclusive resort overlooking Lake Travis. *13500 FM 2769, 512-258-7243, travaasa.com/austin*



Reset

*Never mind those broken New Year's resolutions. **Deer Lake Lodge** offers the kind of spring cleaning that'll stay with you.*

The Deer Lake Lodge experience begins three or four days before your arrival. That's when you must begin denying yourself a number of life's pleasures—coffee, bread, alcohol, processed foods—in preparation for an all-out assault on the toxins supposedly wreaking havoc in your body. How I managed to drive myself to this fifty-acre wellness retreat under such deprivation remains a mystery and a miracle. Tucked away in the Piney Woods, 45 minutes northwest of Houston, the property is idyllically eco-rustic. Its eight modern suites are deftly constructed out of refurbished shipping containers, and its three cabins have whirlpool tubs and screened-in back porches. There's a saltwater pool and an al fresco fireplace. But I wasn't fooled by the inviting surroundings. I knew what I was in for.

Though it's as luxurious as an environmentally friendly hotel can be (organic sheets will never be the softest), Deer Lake Lodge aims to cleanse, not coddle. Tracy Boulware and T.C. Hughes, the Houston sisters who created this place a little more than two years ago, don't believe that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. They believe that what doesn't kill you is likely to stay in your system until you can eliminate it. To help speed the process along, they've designed a semi-fasting program intended to flush the poisons out of your system.

My own war on toxins began in the kitchen of the fasting lounge, where the other first-timers and I learned how to create the detoxifying drink we'd be downing every morning and afternoon. The sludgy concoction of olive oil and liquid minerals was thickened with powdered greens, bentonite clay, and enough apple pectin fiber to keep us from turning into the Donner Party. My fellow cleansers included a yoga studio owner from Ohio, empty nesters from Corpus Christi, and a Houston artist who was about to start taping a Bravo reality show with her plastic-surgeon husband. Lunch was more sludge plus a bonus cup of juice, either green or carrot, while dinner was a mugful of raw vegetable soup and dessert a few ounces of aloe vera juice sweetened with a jigger of apple juice. I lost count of how much of the unlimited lemon water and herbal tea I was knocking back along with my apportioned supplements, but my midsection soon had the sloshy feel of a waterbed. Oddly enough, I wasn't all that hungry. The stomach, it turns out, is an easy thing to trick.

It's not, however, the easiest thing to clean out—or at least that's what I learned from the lodge's certified colon hydrotherapist during the Intro to Colonics class. Two colon power-washing sessions were included in my three-night package, but I didn't have the guts—or my gastroenterologist's blessing—to go through with them. Meanwhile, most of the other guests were swearing by the experience, citing post-release bursts of energy and mental clarity, as well as trimmer tummies (the war on fat being every bit as crucial, for some of my comrades, as the war on toxins).

In lieu of the colonics, I booked a battery of other treatments meant to purge my body of crud. A firm dry-brushing, a gentle lymphatic massage, and a warm magnesium wrap were said to rev up my circulation, drain my lymph nodes, and boost my metabolism, respectively. Then there was the ionic footbath. In a small treatment room, I placed my feet into a bucket of water with a circular metal contraption at the bottom next to a chunk of Himalayan rock salt. A therapist flipped a switch to activate the gizmo, which then supposedly released positive and negative ions into the water to leach toxins and heavy metals through the pores on the bottoms of my feet. Whatever color the water turned would indicate which part of my body was most toxic. After twenty minutes, the therapist and I exchanged grimaces as we looked down at the bubbling brown stew. Concerned for my liver, he asked if I was a smoker or a drinker and seemed puzzled when I swore I wasn't.

In the evenings, we gathered in the living room for “life enhancement” classes. After licking a drop of peppermint oil off our hands to rouse our brains, we listened to a life coach named Tamber advise us on moving beyond quick fixes to make “a quantum shift” in our lives. Though a weekend detox seemed closer to the former than the latter, I was cautiously optimistic that the clean-eating tips I was learning would stick.

When I returned home, everyone asked if I felt cleansed and if I had lost weight. I did, and I had—five pounds. A number of people said my skin glowed. Though it seemed strange to pay for a weekend without solid food, those few days of fasting eradicated my fierce sugar cravings and reset my taste buds. Gone are the daily Cokes and cups of coffee, gone is the hankering for French fries, replaced by a preference for fresh vegetables. I may not have excised every last toxin, but I did shake a few bad habits. And that felt cleansing enough.

Rates start at \$150 a day; 10500 Deer Lake Lodge Rd, Montgomery; 936-647-1383, deerlakelodge.com

Also check out:

Cooper Aerobics Center, Dallas. Learn how to live healthier, and longer, during the five-day Wellness Week at the famed aerobics facility. *12230 Preston Rd, 972-386-4777, cooperhealthyliving.com*

Rancho Cortez Fitness Ranch, Bandera. Battle the bulge while hiking, riding horses, and sweating through barnyard workouts on this dude ranch. *872 Hay Hollar Rd, 830-796-9339, ranchocortez.com*

Optimum Health Institute, Cedar Creek. The institute's 21-day program takes a spiritual approach to detoxing your body and cleansing your mind on fourteen wooded acres just east of Austin.

265 Cedar Ln, 512-303-4817, optimumhealth.org



Renew

*Sometimes it's all about the soul. At **Siddhayatan Spiritual Retreat**, you'll learn how to reconnect with your deepest self.*

When I first pulled in to Siddhayatan, a spiritual retreat center in rural Windom, eighty miles northeast of Dallas, two monks-in-training were just returning from a Walmart run. The retreat offers dozens of programs year-round—everything from Purnam yoga to PTSD recovery—but I'd settled on a two-day meditation workshop. Though most visitors come for just a quiet weekend, you can stay at this ranch house turned Hindu ashram as long as you'd like. Some, like the white-robed monks-in-training, have felt called to stay indefinitely. After peeling off my shoes on the front porch, per the note on the door, I followed the monks inside and was ushered to a pillow at the feet of Acharya Shree Yogeesh, the “living enlightened master” who was going to teach me how to reach my soul's highest state, or at least to put down my phone and reboot my multitasking mind.

These days meditation has become downright trendy. The benefits of the ancient practice, which are being espoused by CEOs and click-bait headline writers alike, are universally coveted: Less stress! Better focus! Increased productivity! Despite the apps and YouTube how-to's and Oprah's cheerleading, I'd still been struggling to get the hang of it. So there I was, on a two-hundred-acre spread in the midst of a tiny ranching community, chanting mantras under the tutelage of the 59-year-old Indian guru with a short white beard and long black hair, who'd founded the retreat in 2008.

And I was hardly the only one. Twenty other soul-searchers had assembled at Acharya Shree's feet as he led us in twenty minutes of rhythmic chanting to calm our brains and balance our chakras. There was a child abuse prosecutor from Dallas, a singer-songwriter from Houston, a young Midwestern couple, a Canadian ER doctor who'd driven down in his Toyota Echo, and a family of four from San Angelo with two elementary-age daughters in matching pink headbands. Many of us had come for the meditation program, but a handful of folks were there specifically to fast, including a nineteen-year-old girl from New Jersey with waist-length blond hair who was on her nineteenth day of consuming nothing but water.

Most of my companions weren't starving themselves, though one of Siddhayatan's primary rules is “no eating of meat products.” The homemade vegetarian meals—mostly Indian dishes served buffet-style—were as tasty as the accommodations were spartan. Many rooms have nothing more than a lamp, a nightstand, and a twin bed with a thin coverlet.

On Saturday morning, after a predawn yoga session, our first lesson on meditation began with three bold sound bites: It cannot be done. It cannot be learned. And it cannot be taught. “Meditation is a noun, not a verb,” Acharya Shree told us. “And the more you try to do it, the less it will happen.” There were, however, specific steps that would help us reach that elusive state of mindfulness. Before we could even think about not thinking, we had to “make our bodies our friends.” First, we flushed out toxins by relearning how to breathe properly: deeply and from our diaphragm. We sat cross-legged and practiced breathing like babies, puffing out our stomachs as we inhaled, sucking them in on each exhale. After several rounds of exercises, I was seeing a few stars but my head felt markedly crisp and clear, like my brain had just been given a breath mint.

If we did these exercises every day, Acharya Shree said, we’d increase the oxygen in our blood, lower our blood pressure, and never get cancer. “This is why not a single yogi has medical insurance, including me!” Although prone to sweeping statements (“In Europe there is not a single town without a yoga studio”), the guru was a funny and captivating storyteller. I wasn’t yet ready to give up all my possessions (or barbecue, for that matter) and take up residency, but the benefits of a more mindful existence were becoming apparent.

During my last meditation session, as we all lay on the floor listening to a recording of ocean waves (and the sound of someone snoring), I concentrated on my third eye, envisioning that the middle of my forehead was being pierced by a white light. When Acharya Shree’s soothing voice broke in again, I wasn’t sure how much time had elapsed—fifteen minutes? thirty?—or where my mind had drifted to. But for that long, still moment, I was a million miles away from the ranch-house ashram outside one of the tiniest towns in Texas. When my thoughts came flooding back in, the first one was “Progress!”

Rates start at \$50 a day; 9985 E. Texas Hwy 56, Windom; 903-487-0717, siddhayatan.org

Also check out:

Retreat in the Pines, Mineola. This thirty-acre East Texas sanctuary hosts retreats ranging from “Yoga for Your Lifestyle” to “Growing Your Gratitude.” 431 CR 2487, 469-867-0766, retreatinthepines.com

Namaste Retreat, Boerne. Whether you want to paint, pray, practice yoga, or scrapbook with your friends, this Hill Country getaway will help you customize the ideal retreat. 139 Oak Acres Ln, 830-385-2333, namasteretreat.com

Montserrat Retreat House, Lake Dallas. Achieve inner tranquillity during a weekend of silence at this Jesuit campus on Lake Dallas. 600 N. Shady Shores Dr, 940-321-6020,

montserratretreat.org



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