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Mountain HIGH

A new luxury health retreat's tough-love approach gets amazing results, if you can hack the pace — and the portions.

By EUGENIE KELLY

I've just trudged through the biggest steaming cow pat imaginable, but right now I'm beyond caring. You see, stepping around it would have required exerting an extra iota of energy, which I just don't have. At the risk of sounding dramatic, at this moment, I've kind of lost the will to live.

I'm on the home stretch of a 15-kilometre hike on New Zealand's Heather Jock Track, which winds its way up from the head of Lake Wakatipu, 48 clicks from Queenstown. Sure, the panoramic views from the top — 1135 metres up — were worth the sweat required to get there. This is *Lord of the Rings* country, after all. But the searing pain in my hammies and glutes mean all I want to do is hug the nearest tree and have a good cry. And that's what sucks about hiking. It's like childbirth: once it's over, you forget the agony and blissfully plan your next one.

Today is day two of a seven-day "wellness adventure" retreat held at Aro Hā, a brand-spanking-new holistic boot camp located in Glenorchy, which aims to detoxify up to 15 guests at a time (capacity is 32 guests), freeing them from their tyrannical to-do lists, CrackBerrys, double-shot lattes and salted-caramel-slice addictions. There's no television, caffeine or mobile coverage (thankfully, the sketchy Wi-Fi in the rooms means you're not totally cut off from the world), while the menu is strictly vegetarian paleo fare and mostly raw. Hence no foods that *ruin* lives (bread, dairy or rib-eye dinners washed down with a cheeky shiraz).

I'm here because, in addition to my Nespresso habit spiralling out of control, I'm just so damn tired all the time: juggling kids, work, travelling and exercise is killing me. I'm convinced I have mysterious

allergies to foods and am bamboozled about what I should (and shouldn't) be eating. Paleo? Sugar-free? Intermittent fasting? Or d) the best bits cherry-picked from all of the above, when they suit.

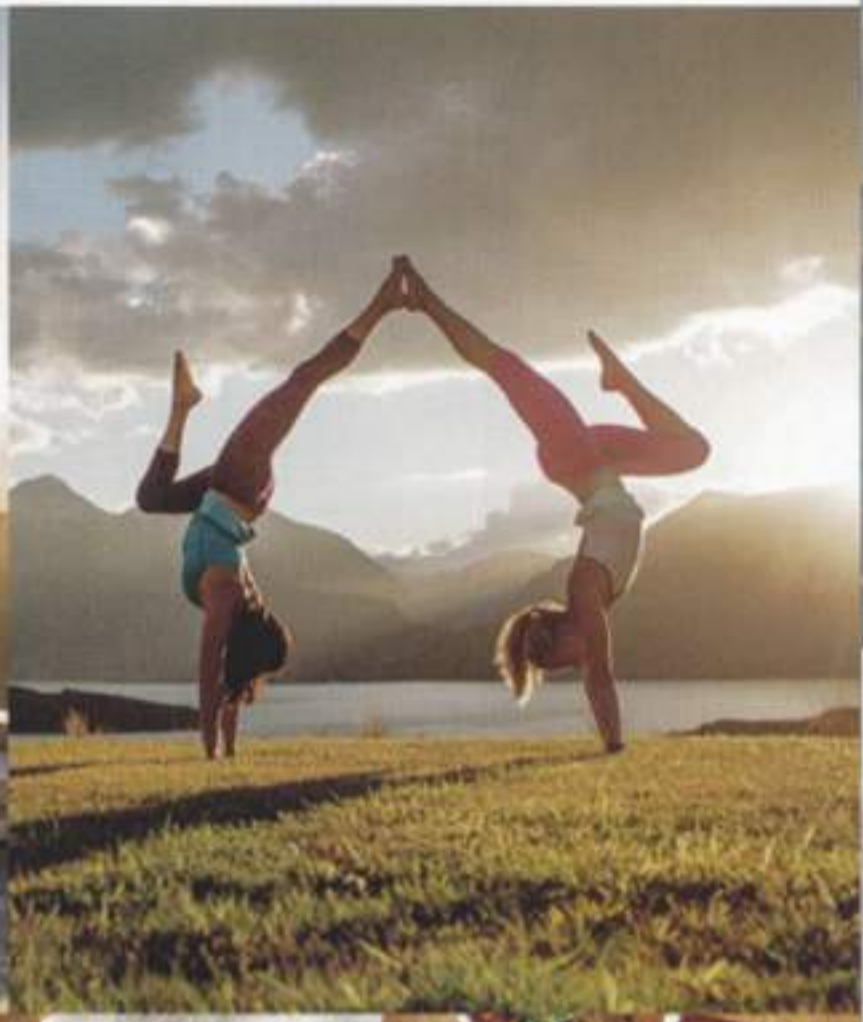
One of the brains behind Aro Hā — which in Māori means life force — is American wellness guru Damian Chaparro, whose CV includes a seven-year stint at Malibu's celeb-infested The Ashram.

"A lot of what we do is based on their amazing weeklong program that was developed by two Swedish women 30 years ago," he tells me. "I've also been influenced by the Esalen Institute in Big Sur [California], where I've also worked, where they constantly bring in fresh educators, combining their outlook with our program, which we know works."

Whether you opt for a five- or seven-day program at Aro Hā, a typical day's diary goes something like this ...

I'm woken at 5.30am by a gong outside my room — a reminder that yoga starts at 6am. The exercise component is pretty much non-negotiable, so I get dressed, stumble to the studio, down a glass of lemon water (alkaline-forming, natch) to help get rid of inner gunk, then do an hour of yoga to "nourish my inner soul". Or that's what they tell me. I don't know about you, but I always find yoga far less excruciating when the teacher has a great body. I'm not shallow. I just need something to aspire to when I'm in side plank, and visiting teacher Nianna Bray's abs are a joke. The New York-based instructor — who actually has better hair than Kate Middleton, if you can believe it — verges on hippie-dippy with all her spiritual chakra-speak and constant references to something suspiciously sexual-sounding called the sacral plexus.

Opposite page: hiking near Glenorchy, New Zealand. This page, clockwise from below: the spa overlooking Pigeon Island; outdoor yoga; the aptly named Spectacular salad.



But the hour flies and at 7am breakfast is served. Oh, look! It's a smoothie! There are moments like this one when Aro Hā's 1400-calorie-a-day menu could best be described as assisted-starvation camp, but the glass of green stuff (coconut meat, kale, blueberries and my new obsession, bee pollen) is surprisingly satisfying. On other days, breakfast is a teacup-sized bowl of raw muesli, a slice of zucchini loaf or an English muffin with avocado, with most of the produce sourced from Aro Hā's own permaculture gardens. All coupled with copious cups of herbal tea.

At 8am we fill our CamelBaks with water, strap on our hiking shoes and drive to nearby mountains to start trekking. The gorgeous scenery looks Photoshopped to perfection and I half expect Julie Andrews to jump out and start belting out "The Hills are Alive ...". But three hours in you stop noticing it, slogging along in an almost meditative state. I'm waiting for my "epiphany" to happen — inspired by the story I heard about Gwyneth Paltrow and the time she was hiking in Sedona, Arizona. Apparently, the rocks told her, "You have the answers. You are the teacher." I'm hoping that's going to happen to me. But the rocks here aren't responding. "Just being in nature is half the work we do here," Chaparro assures me later. "We send you out there and Mother Nature takes care of the rest. You can go to a gym and jump on a treadmill and sweat, but there are no therapeutic benefits."

Returning to Aro Hā at 1pm, it's lunch (vegetarian spring rolls!) followed by a much-needed deep-tissue massage and mandatory afternoon classes. Primal movement, qigong, circuit sessions ... and, at 6pm, restorative yoga. Dinner, I have vague flashbacks of. There was some group-circle hand-holding blessing thing going on at one stage, methinks. Then crashing into bed, comatose, around the 9pm mark.

Undoubtedly, a lot of Type As will sign up for this retreat: bankers, businesswomen and the burnt-out who can afford the \$5700+ price tag for a week here. And for that, you'll still have to share a bathroom. "The property has been designed specifically to make people connect," says Chaparro. "In each building you have two bedrooms adjoining a communal tea-making space and shared bathroom. You still have your private space, but you've got the chance to connect with another person. And everyone receives the same level of great service, regardless of



"Hiking is like childbirth: once it's over, you forget the agony and blissfully plan your next one."

whether you're Oprah or the gardener that someone has sent through."

Three years and almost \$30 million in the making, the facilities are undeniably impressive, boasting not only slick minimalist interiors but also a divine pool/steam/sauna area you'll while away hours in. It also has its own hydro-power generation

and biolytic waste-processing systems, which in non-tech speak translates to: it creates its own power and manages its own sewage. Impressive, and necessary, considering Aro Hā is slap-bang in the middle of nowhere.

If you're ready to dismiss Aro Hā, thinking you need to be super fit to tackle 15-kilometre sub-alpine hikes every day, there's no denying it's tough, but there was a 71-year-old in our group, along with a couple of fiftysomething non-exercisers, and everyone coped. Sure, every time I collapsed in a chair it felt like shavasana, but by the time the week was up, I'd shed 3.5 kilograms, was bursting out of my skin with energy and actually craved yoga. Even more shocking: the next time I turn up for a vinyasa class back home and my instructor *dares* to have a Buddha belly bulging out over her lululemon leggings, I think I just might cope. ■

Aro Hā, aro-ha.com.