

A vibrant, high-angle photograph of a tropical forest. The scene is dominated by various shades of green, from deep forest greens to bright, sunlit greens. In the lower-left foreground, a portion of a wooden building with horizontal slats and a balcony with a blue railing is visible. The text is centered in the upper half of the image, with 'THE' in white, 'HEALTH' in a light green, and 'RETREAT EXPERIENCE' in white. The text is framed by thin white horizontal lines.

# THE HEALTH RETREAT EXPERIENCE

BY SUDHA HAMILTON

WHAT TO EXPECT  
WHEN YOU CHECK THE  
"OLD YOU" IN AT RECEPTION  
AND ENTER A WORLD FREE  
FROM EVERYDAY STRESSORS



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**ASK** people if they know what a health retreat or spa is and most will give an affirmative answer. Attempt to qualify that by enquiring, “Have you actually been to a health retreat?” and not quite so many can say yes. You may have read about health retreats or spas, or know a friend who has been to one, but perhaps you haven’t been to one yourself. With that in mind, the *WellBeing* team recently conducted some experiential research and is pleased to share its findings with you.

### Ancient origins

The origins of the health spa date back thousands of years, and there are many well-known surviving examples of Roman bath-house culture throughout the world. The town of Bath in England, for example, sits above the active hot springs around which the Romans established one of their bath houses. The town of Spa in Belgium is the likely origin of the word “spa”, as this was a particularly popular Roman health retreat.

However, just about every culture created a place for its people to gather, bathe and relax. Baths were most often (but not always) built above naturally occurring hot springs, and the Romans built vast ovens to heat some of their bath houses when necessary. Turkish baths were famous for the skill and artistry of their attendants, with the experience of visiting the baths encompassing massage, scrubbing, sauna, barbering, shaving and, of course, bathing. Communal bathing has always been important in the Japanese culture, with each village or suburb in Japan having its own bath house. Many of the therapeutic practices we are familiar with today — massage, aromatherapy, fasting and detoxification, thermal therapy and spa therapy — had their beginnings in these places of rest and recuperation.

Considering later sociopolitical attitudes to health spas in Western communities, it seems that we of Anglo-Saxon heritage and the Protestant work ethic lost the thread of connection with these sanctuaries of delight hundreds of years ago. The early Christian Church considered them places of heathen practice that promoted sinful preoccupation with the body; its doctrine did not allow for such comforts of the flesh.

This attitude later evolved into the reality that health spas were places only for the wealthy and powerful, who, of course, were seen by the masses as inherently evil anyway. So the health spa became a rare treat for the rich and famous (and today, something we read about in the Sunday papers in relation to “recovering” celebrities!).

### Andrew’s story

Andrew, one of our researchers, went to CampEden Health Retreat in Currumbin Valley, Queensland — the longest established health retreat in Australia, having been operating since 1983. As CampEden is the forerunner of the emergence of the health retreat industry in Australia, we thought we’d look at what it could offer Andrew.

Andrew has a few health challenges that have been confounding doctors and naturopaths for a number of years, notably virulent eczema that has not responded to treatments by skin specialists or holistic practitioners and continues to plague Andrew’s life. So it was with grateful optimism that he agreed to make the trip north to CampEden.

They say that first impressions count, and from the moment Andrew arrived at camp for his introduction session with his team leader, his vulnerability met with a welcome and caring energy. “I think that for most people, when arriving at the door of the unknown, handing over control of the basics of life — what and when you eat, and your sleeping arrangements — and facing new day-to-day activities, there are fears and reservations about what lies in store for you. The sooner you engage a certain degree of trust in those you’re undertaking the journey with, the better you feel and the further you can let yourself go,” he said.

He also commented on just how beautiful CampEden’s location in the Currumbin Valley is, and I think from my own health retreat experience that visual inspiration is important when you are embarking on a life-changing course. The health retreat experience can be likened to climbing a mountain from where you can look down on your life in the everyday lane and see what, where and how you can make adjustments towards a healthier lifestyle.

CampEden is a luxurious retreat in the resort league. When faced with the array of equipment in the gym hall, Andrew felt like he was looking at a circus big top — a little daunted but ready for what the week had in store for him. On your arrival, a wellbeing assessment is carried out so that a tailored program can be created for you. For someone like Andrew, who has a number of personal health requirements, this was particularly apt. He met with the beauty spa manager who performed some skin testing procedures to find the right products for his sensitive skin.

CampEden is structured like a true camp with team leaders and group support leaders, and these people become your personal guides. When you’re voluntarily relinquishing control, the primordial issues — particularly food — become even more



important. According to Andrew, “The food was fantastic, and although saturated fats, most carbohydrates, sugars and wheats are removed, you soon move beyond noticing that and just enjoy the freshness of the flavours.” After a session of kayaking at the beach, Andrew returned to shore to be served the most amazing spelt and buckwheat pancakes with fresh raspberry purée. In that magical setting it was one of the highlights of this Taurean’s adventure.

Hatha yoga is on the program as a gentle introduction to yoga, and there is qi gong every day at 6.15am to wake the body through the breath. These activities are designed to offer both exercise and self-awareness. Standing facing Mt Tallebudgera, breathing and stretching, Andrew commented on the delicate majesty he could feel as the morning sunlight struck the green escarpment above.

Bushwalks through the Currumbin Valley are an integral part of the program, as contact with nature is essential to the grounding experience of the health retreat. It’s something that only the natural settings of these places can offer, away from the frenetic, wound-up city environment.

What struck Andrew most was the genuine caring love he felt from so many of the people working at CampEden — which is so vital, because the health retreat experience is fundamentally about opening up and revealing your vulnerabilities. Life is about experiencing joy and pain and not about numbing ourselves to pain and hoping to be happy all the time. So there will be times during your health retreat experience when you may not be feeling great, you may have a detoxification headache, or you may simply want to escape to some habitual behaviour that is not accessible here. However, these feelings will pass, and great joy and even ecstasy is possible — most likely when you’re whizzing down the valley, holding onto the flying fox for dear life, with the biggest smile on your face!

Some have expressed skepticism that you can go to these paradisiacal places where holistic best practices are “on tap” and actually derive any lasting benefit. Can you take home the “new you”, or will you revert to the tried-and-true “old you”? Certainly, you won’t have those team leaders at your beck and call when you return home, but from looking at the material Andrew brought back with him, CampEden has recognised this concern and has put strategies in place to address it. The take-home material not only contains pages of affirmations, qi gong instruction sheets and meditations, but also lists of natural therapists, yoga classes and the like in every capital city. Also, Andrew said many of the classes were about preparing healthy things at home and offered

practical demonstrations and techniques for maintaining holistic best practices.

Memorable highlights for Andrew included:

- The hot rocks massage from a beautiful masseuse who touched his heart.
- The algae body wrap for his devastated skin, which was something akin to physical enlightenment!
- The comradeship with the other guests at the retreat; the honest sharing and support was something he hadn’t experienced since his time in the army.

### Universal qualities

There is a huge variety of health retreats and spas in Australia, ranging from a single room or chalet on someone’s property to the palatial resort that offers gyms, beauty spas and five-star hotel accommodation. Looking into what makes the essential health retreat experience, I think there are a number of universal qualities these retreats and spas share.

#### The environment

The location of a health retreat needs to offer a beautiful and inspirational opportunity to commune with nature. Many of the best health retreats are on or near special geophysical locations like mountain ranges, or within paradisiacal valleys. The ambience of the retreat will reflect the natural setting, and the physical activities available will also be defined by the location.

#### The program on offer

We are all unique individuals with varying degrees of physical fitness and application, so there needs to be a level of flexibility and the customising of programs to suit each person — unless the retreat is defined by a certain practice (vipassana meditation, for example) where there is a single focus for all to follow.

When you arrive, a personal wellbeing assessment is usually carried out by the retreat’s coordinator, to find the right program for you. The number of days you’ll be staying at the health retreat will greatly influence the program, as it takes time for detoxification to happen and your fitness levels to increase. Exercise should ideally begin gently, building up over time and as the day progresses. A balance of challenging and pleasurable activities will allow for emotional highs and lows, which is so important to the experience.

#### Food

Food becomes even more important than usual when you’re on retreat. The focus may or may not be weight loss, but the removal of saturated fats, stimulants (for example, caffeine), sugar and carbohydrates is going to serve you best during your stay. The change in diet is an opportunity to see your psychological and emotional connection to food while physically cleaning out your body. Eating moderately at the right times for your body will make a huge difference to your sense of wellbeing. If you’ve developed a dependence on drugs or alcohol, abstaining from them and combining this with regular exercise will change your perception of life.

Eating food is a celebration of life, but it’s important to remain conscious while eating. On retreat, communal eating away from the television and other distractions such as the computer is a profoundly healthy activity. It’s not just about *what* you eat but also *the way* you eat.

#### Massage and therapeutic practices

Receiving treatments from highly skilled professional practitioners



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is all part of the healing experience at health retreats. These will usually be included in your program, and the make-up and type of sessions will be determined from your initial assessment. The range of massages, skin treatments and other healing techniques will vary from place to place, but a health retreat will be judged by the quality of its practitioners. Relaxation that comes from the caring touch of a genuine healer is the desired outcome.

Speaking with Maggie Treanor, manager of Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort & Spa in New South Wales, I was struck by her obvious devotion to healing. Maggie spoke about the importance of her staff coming from a genuinely clear space during their contact with spa guests, and how the vulnerability of the client must be treated with absolute care. Lilianfels' spa practitioners are currently being trained in the use of Australian Bush Flower Essences.

There is a rare ambience of calm emanating from Lilianfels and the facilities are a lovely mix of old world and state of the art. The image of the outdoor swimming pool, permanently heated to 28°C and steaming in the middle of winter on the edge of the Three Sisters in Katoomba, remains with me. Lilianfels sees itself primarily as a health spa and continues to expand its already impressive facilities.

#### Attitudinal healing

A health retreat usually has a fundamental philosophy that informs its work and is often the founding reason for its existence. As most of us know, you can't just treat the body and not the mind. Understanding why you are in a current situation can allow you to move beyond destructive patterns of behaviour. How a retreat goes about helping you do that may be indicated on its website or promotional material.

At Fountainhead Health & Healing Centre in Maleny, Queensland, founder Wayne Parrot says, "The best medicine of all is to teach people not to need any." In particular, Fountainhead runs programs dealing with the treatment of clinical depression. The attitudinal work is the real crux of the healing at Fountainhead, but it goes hand in hand with the full health retreat experience.

The program begins with relaxation and observation, with the first few days of the week devoted to pampering guests and providing as many physical activities as they desire. During this time, it is determined if the individual is actually suffering from clinical depression. Wayne believes that "many other states of

mind are confused with clinical depression. The key to identifying clinical depression is in the individual's lack of goals and future focus and lack of faith in having goals."

A commitment between Fountainhead and the guest is then brokered in relation to whether the guest really wants to move forward, knowing that eradicating the illness will require change and action. Following from this is an exercise that defines the individual's current values; these are written up so that he or she can clearly see what their "rules of the game" have been. Wayne often finds that the belief that certain things will bring us happiness and success is what actually stops us from enjoying life. Fountainhead's aim, therefore, is to help the individual re-focus on the wisdom gained through life's journey rather than on achieving specific material and non-material goals. This can involve breaking down outmoded belief systems that may be underpinned by the need for parental or societal approval, to help a self-determined individual emerge.

At Fountainhead this attitudinal work is carried out in the stunning setting of the Glasshouse Mountains in Maleny, and you can walk amidst the growing organic produce that will soon grace your table and energise your body. On my two stays at Fountainhead I found a remarkable energy of transformation that was shared by guests and staff alike; there was lots of laughter, music and sensational food.

#### Holistic best practice skills

Passing on the skills you need to maintain your commitment to your health is a vital ingredient that health retreats tend to include in their programs. An obvious way some of them do this is through classes in the many forms of cooking that promote a healthy diet. The living foods approach, which involves juicing and preparing raw foods, is now popular. More traditionally, high-fibre/low-fat diets abound in retreats, as does the low-carbohydrate approach. When you return home, avoiding "quick fixes" such as alcohol and coffee can be achieved with greater success if you are armed with the knowledge to provide yourself with healthy alternatives.

A daily or weekly meditation, yoga, tai chi or qi gong practice can provide you with the peace of mind to consider your health honestly. Consulting a holistic practitioner on a regular basis will also give you that objective insight into your health and perhaps a relaxing and healing treatment. Notes from your retreat stay and your wellbeing assessment will give you direction and be a reminder of your continuing commitment to your health.

Going to a health retreat is ultimately about inviting into your life the structure, discipline and knowledge you'll receive from those who have dedicated their lives to health and helping others. Whether you go for a specific condition, a clean-out or just a healthy holiday, the retreats we visited were all committed to providing the best possible environment in which their guests could heal and grow. Of course, to truly discover what the health retreat or spa experience is like, you'll have to go yourself and experience a practical taste of paradise! ☺

#### References

- CampEden Health Retreat  
[www.campeden.com.au](http://www.campeden.com.au)
- Fountainhead Health & Healing Centre  
[www.fountainhead.com.au](http://www.fountainhead.com.au)
- Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort & Spa  
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*Thank you to CampEden for the accompanying photographs.*