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LET'S GET PHYSICAL

The luxury of a new retreat centre near Queenstown compensates for a challenging week of detoxing, writes **Sara Greig.**

THE SCREAMS echo down the hall, piercing the blissful atmosphere. Moments of silence are interrupted by a series of yelps, moans and whimpers. The infamous theory that men have a low pain threshold is proven right, in the most unlikely of scenarios – a massage.

The venue is Aro Ha, a \$30 million self-sustaining wellness retreat which opened recently on the shore of Lake Wakatipu in

Glenorchy, 45 kilometres from Queenstown. The centre's first retreat has begun and participants will spend the next seven days dedicated to their own health and wellbeing.

Massages are a big part of the experience: each guest has a daily hour-long session with a highly skilled massage therapist. Michel, a French masseur who now lives in Florida, has come to New Zealand for the first time to help out his friend and Aro Ha co-founder, Chris Madison. Michel can easily alleviate muscle pain by using his hands, arms and, importantly, his thumbs of steel. He quickly earns the nickname, The Master. People emerge from his massages sore and slightly confused, but claim they are the best they have ever had.

The Master is very modest and in French style, simply shrugs off the praise. The massage itself, which involves pulling and

realigning the body, is very different to what any of us has experienced before. People are stretched into positions they didn't know they could get into. It is going to be painful but

everyone takes Michel's advice to "just breathe through it". A middle-aged man from Queenstown swears that breathing techniques like those used during labour were the only thing that got him through.

THE RETREAT'S signature programme, Delve Deep, is very much about being active in order to become fit and gain mental clarity. It combines yoga and hiking in a strict regime that has participants on the go from 5.30am until 7pm. A typical day includes 6am yoga, a raw vegan breakfast, a 10-15km hike, lunch,

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various classes in the afternoon and restorative yoga and meditation at 6pm, followed by dinner.

Although the schedule is busy, the luxurious facilities and skilled staff help to get us through the day. One of the highlights is the food. Mostly raw and all organic and vegetarian, meal times always thrill the senses. Food is impeccably presented, with edible flowers often adorning the plates – sometimes looking too pretty to eat. If the fact that there is no meat for a week puts you off at all, it really shouldn't. The food ranges from gourmet sushi, stuffed

mushrooms, salads, gluten free bread and soups to an array of smoothies, all of which are filling and satisfying.

Meals are carefully selected so that your body gets all the right nutrients and vitamins to get you through the day. There is also the satisfaction of knowing most of what you are eating is grown on-site. One of my favourite meals of the week is not a fancy-looking dish but a mere smoothie. It's a concoction of blueberries, coconut meat, flaxseed oil, maca powder, spinach and bee pollen. It's extremely filling and tastes like chocolate – need I say more?

Chefs Debbie Crompton and

Rani Silva always come out of the kitchen to explain the ingredients of each meal. This is helpful as some of the ingredients, such as macadamia cheese, are quite foreign to our palates.

Chef Rani, a Brazilian with a great passion for raw foods, quickly becomes a favourite among the guests. His friendly manner and enthusiasm for each dish are infectious, and we find ourselves wanting to make everything he puts in front of us.

We get the opportunity during a cooking demonstration, which is one of the afternoon classes on

offer. Rani shows the group how to make the chickpea-free carrot humus served the previous day. There are cheers when he shares the next recipe – the chocolate-tasting smoothie. After blending the ingredients together, he sprinkles little golden beads of bee pollen on top. Their sweetness and crunch make the smoothie. There is actually no chocolate involved – the malty flavour comes from maca powder, a root vegetable said to enhance energy levels. The recipe is surprisingly simple and guests can easily make it at home.

The next day, a bell rings wakes us at 5.30am. It's toxic

Tuesday, the day when your body is truly detoxing and you might crave sugar, caffeine and even meat.

Some guests have headaches, but they're unsure if the cause is lack of sleep or coffee cravings. We are soon distracted with a yoga session.

The week's schedule is not shared in advance, so guests find out what they are doing on the day. The aim is to let go of the concept of time and not be worried about what is happening next.

Guests are guided through each day. It's a liberating feeling for those used to being in control

of every aspect of their lives, but some find it hard to let go. There are often questions about which hike or classes will be on offer the next day, but most glide through the day, doing whatever comes up.

Free time after classes is spent relaxing in the spa, napping or reading in the lounge. At the spa, a bathing suit and robe is standard attire. There are two saunas, traditional and infrared, and we are encouraged to have a sauna, then brave the cold outdoor plunge pool. After a challenging hike, this hot and cold therapy works wonders for tired muscles and sore joints.

The spa pool is set into the ground in front of the spa complex. It's a surreal feeling to sit, arms hanging over the edge, surrounded by jagged mountains rising up and out of the smooth lake.

OUR DAILY hikes vary from flat paths to uphill treks. All are more than 10km long, but guests are able to go at their own pace, with guides at the front, middle and end of the group.

A visually stunning hike that starts with a boat ride across Lake Wakatipu is a favourite. The undulating path of the Lake Rere

Greenstone Loop makes it easy to recover from the uphill legs and most of us are able to walk together, past forest, rivers, waterfalls and farmland.

Stopping on a bridge to eat some vegan snacks, we each unwrap a piece of gold foil and find a piece of raw chocolate – a small but blissful treat.

There are no more golden treats for the rest of the week, but we no longer need the boost. During the last yoga class of the retreat, bodies slide easily into the guided positions as we look through a wood-framed window that stretches from ceiling to floor across one side of the room. Inside the frame, the lake resembles a screensaver that changes with time. Sitting cross-legged we breathe in, raising our arms out and then up above their heads.

As we exhale, the room resonates with "ohmmm" and sunbeams escape through the clouds and dance across the lake. The challenges of the last six days are long forgotten.

■ The writer was a guest of Aro Ha.

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As you do: A guest enters into the spirit at Aro Ha.

Photos: SARA GREIG



Fine outlook: One of the accommodation buildings at Aro Ha retreat centre.

FACT FILE

Getting there

Aro Ha, Station Valley Rd, Glenorchy, is a 45-minute drive from Queenstown. Air New Zealand flies direct to Queenstown from Christchurch and Wellington. Aro Ha provides airport transfers.

Staying there

Retreats and prices vary, starting from \$4550 per person for a fully inclusive five-day retreat.

Being there

Activities include yoga, meditation, massage, hiking and saunas.

More information

See aro-ha.com.