

THE PATHS OF ARO-HĀ

Invigorate, enliven, enlighten; New Zealand's Aro-Hā Luxury Health Retreat offers guests all this, and a life-altering glow to take home with them, writes Tricia Welsh.





“You can’t possibly think this is enjoyable,” I mutter through clenched teeth as I struggle on a steep mountain hike above Glenorchy in New Zealand’s South Island. I’m one of 12 participants on a signature five-day ‘Invigorate & Enrich’ wellness adventure at the new purpose-built Aro-Hā luxury health retreat, near Queenstown in the picturesque Southern Alps. “I’d rather be sorting the sock drawer,” I add, *sotto voce*, as I bring up the rear on this obligatory daily activity. But the scenery is jaw-dropping as I plough on regardless, stopping every now and then to take in the magnificent views. An

overnight dusting of mid-summer snow has transformed jagged peaks into a magical postcard scene.

Aro-Hā is the brainchild of American Chris Madison and business partner Damian Chaparro who met at The Ashram in Calabasas in California: Madison as an exhausted, over-worked participant and Chaparro as a retreat leader.

Madison, a highly successful hedge fund tycoon whose best friend insisted he go to the long-established yoga retreat to rebalance his workaholic lifestyle, went under sufferance – and then willingly enrolled another nine times, deciding the experience was so life-changing he wanted to establish his own.

After much searching, Madison bought 8.4 hectares of pastoral land adjacent to Blanket Bay Lodge overlooking Lake Wakatipu and has invested US\$30million in the secluded, self-sustaining retreat.

The low-slung free-standing cedar buildings were designed by Wellington-based architectural firm Tennent & Brown and feature blonde woods that nestle into the rugged landscape. Spaces are well designed to maximise views. An

Aro-Hā offers five- and seven-day all-inclusive retreat programs with a philosophy of holistic, results-oriented fitness that includes yoga, hikes, meditation, therapeutic massage, nutritional education and more.

How will I cope with this rigorous routine with a torn cartilage in one knee and a general dislike for yoga? But my sedentary

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lifestyle needs a shake-up and I’m looking forward to the detoxifying vegetarian food and a promised ‘life-altering glow’. Besides, just being in this cool, clean air and scenic environment should make me feel good anyway – shouldn’t it?

Days start early with a 5.30am wake-up bell on a computerised in-room wall

screen that lists the day’s activities. Then it’s straight into a Vinyasa Flow yoga session in a dedicated yoga pavilion whose huge front picture window provides a glorious natural landscape through to the tranquil lake and mesmerising mountains. Grazing fat lambs and black Angus cattle seem to query our poses, and even a wild hare stops by one morning to gaze at us curiously.

Our first breakfast is a cleansing green juice. Is that all? And then it’s straight into the three- to four-hour hike up a steep incline to Bonnie Jean Hut. Another day we follow the glacial blue Rees River where foxgloves line the rollercoaster road through a centuries-old red beech forest and overnight rain creates roadside waterfalls.

On yet another day, we kayak some 1.2 kilometres across the lake to Pigeon Island where we hike up to the crest and spy a rare Buff Weka.

Afternoons allow time to relax in the spa facility, attend a nutrition demonstration or listen to a talk about the sustainability practices of the retreat, such as its high-efficiency Passive Haus design techniques.

More than half a hectare of a variety of fruit trees, vegetables and berries has been planted; heirloom tomatoes, micro-greens and herbs are harvested for use. Farm manager, Christina Lister, is hopeful that within two years they will be using up to 90 per cent homegrown produce.

After five reasonably gruelling days I can feel my muscles have firmed up, I have lost a few kilos, have come to enjoy yoga and can even hold a *natarajāsana* ‘lord of the dance’ pose. Now I can’t wait to start growing my own sprouts, planning my own walks, and yes, even booking into a yoga class – perhaps. ♦

Travel file

Accommodation
www.aro-ha.com

Getting there
Guests of Aro Hā are met at Queenstown International Airport.
www.airnewzealand.com.au

Further information
Please note that Aro Hā will be closed for the month of June.

01 The paths around Aro Hā are a walker’s delight
02 Passive Haus buildings
03 Meals are healthy and nutritious
04 Aro Hā’s rooms are spacious and light
05 Rebalance yourself with a yoga class
06 Cool clean air and plenty of exercise