

THERE'S NO PLACE

*Emphasising not only body and mind, but also sustainability, a new wellness sanctuary brings a breath of fresh air to New Zealand's South Island. **TRICIA WELSH** checks in*

The Southern Alps provide a compelling backdrop as viewed across the lake from Aro Ha

LIKE ARO-HA

All 12 of us who have signed up for a five-day “Invigorate & Enrich” wellness adventure at **Aro-Ha**, New Zealand’s newest health retreat, have different goals or expectations. And with a torn cartilage in one knee and a general dislike for yoga, it is with some degree of trepidation that I arrive at the low-slung wooden complex that nestles into the rugged foothills of the Southern Alps overlooking Lake Wakatipu, a 40km scenic drive from Queenstown.

This purpose-built \$30m facility is the brainchild of

former hedge fund manager Chris Madison and business partner Damian Chaparro, who met ten years ago at The Ashram in Calabasas, California. Workaholic Madison had been persuaded by his best friend to go to the acclaimed retreat to get some balance back into his life. Reluctantly, he went and quickly connected with Chaparro, a retreat leader there. Madison enrolled nine more times (both in California and at the retreat’s sister property in Mallorca), and saw it as “life-changing”. He explains: “I found the benefits so profound that it inspired me to create a ‘next generation’ retreat centre ▶

expanding, on the transformative wellness programming with the added pillars of permaculture and sustainability.”

At Aro-Ha, they have finessed the retreat concept to create unique all-inclusive five- and seven-day wellness adventure programmes based on yoga, long daily hikes, core strength training, meditation, therapeutic massage and detoxifying vegetarian cuisine. “There seem to be points in people’s lives where shift is necessary, and this is a place that fosters transformative experiences,” adds Chaparro of his brainchild, which sits within eyeshot of Aotearoa’s peaks.

While I’m a tad older than their profiled potential guest (70% female, around 40 years old), I’m ready to kick-start my lifestyle with new energy and a promised “life-altering glow”. The daily programme is anything but pampering: predawn wake-up calls, sunrise vinyasa flow yoga practice, breakfast – just a detoxifying “green juice” on day one – followed by a 10-16km sub-alpine hike into the surrounding mountainous countryside and back to base for lunch.

Afternoons are a little more gentle with down time, welcome massages to soothe aching bodies, and an array of activities – perhaps a cooking class, an introduction to permaculture or insight into the

THE DETAILS

Invigorate & Enrich five-day/four-night retreats and Delve Deep seven-day/ six-night retreats are offered year-round, except in June. Conditions can be harsh in winter with low temperatures and occasionally snowbound roads. aro-ha.com





sustainability practices of the retreat (high-efficiency Passive House design techniques, recycled water and the first distributed hydronic solar-thermal heating scheme in the country). Evenings follow with restorative yoga, dinner and occasional talks by guest educators.

Unlike some holistic retreats, meals here are wonderfully fulfilling, with mouthwatering dishes inspired by Mediterranean, Asian and Moroccan flavours and created by Brazilian-born wholefoods chef Rani Silva, who works in tandem with Los Angeles-based Suzie Bohannon, food consultant to The Ashram and author of *No Sweeter than The Ripest Cherry*. And while only micro-greens, herbs and a few heirloom tomatoes are currently harvested daily from the kitchen garden, farm manager Christina Lister anticipates that within two years some 90% of produce will come from their expansive farm that is planted with a wide variety of vegetables, berries and assorted fruit trees. “I’m particularly excited about growing quinoa – which should come on stream very soon,” she says.

We get to discover quite a bit of the area over the five-day programme, tramping alongside the glacial Rees River where overnight rain results in trickling waterfalls, hiking up the steep Bonnie Jean route with spectacular views over Glenorchy, and kayaking across the lake to the natural bird sanctuary of Pigeon Island. But it’s results we’re after, and on check-out we all admit feeling substantially better than when we arrived with bonus weight loss, better skintone, flexibility and a renewed love for yoga. Now all that’s left is to continue it once we’re back in the real world. ◀

Clockwise from top left: the sanctuary shown in all its remote beauty; timber building surrounded by spectacular scenery; yoga is a central pillar of the retreat’s philosophy; a breakfast plate of nuts and grains