

## DESTINATION: *refresh*

In need of a break, possibly even a chance to nurture yourself rather than everyone else? Maybe you've even considered going on a wellness getaway but never taken the step of booking, fearful of a regimented daily routine that might tire you out rather than rev you up? **Andrea Duvall** has found a retreat that nurtures, refreshes and rejuvenates with results that last long after your flight home.

**M**e and my body have been in need of a little refresh for a while – a chance to catch my breath and learn a few new habits that would help make getting out of my desk chair that little bit easier (surely all that stiffness can't be normal?). My solution: a retreat that offered me a chance to rest as well as gain a few wellness tools to take home.

Which is how I found myself standing on a wooden boat deck overlooking a quiet beach, just after sunrise, one arm stretched high into the air, with the other plunged to my ankles, legs akimbo. "Breathe and stretch, that's it, that's it! Imagine your muscles are soft like chewy caramel!" urged yoga instructor Charlotte Dodson.

I'd signed up for a Wellness Week – two hours of yoga every day for five days. Having never been to any kind of health retreat, I wasn't sure what to expect. Looking at some of the health 'spa' options out there I was a little intimidated by their boot-camp rigour, so this seemed a gentler option: a Wellness Week at Pinetrees Resort on Lord Howe Island, including two hours of yoga daily led by Charlotte Dodson, yoga instructor to Miranda

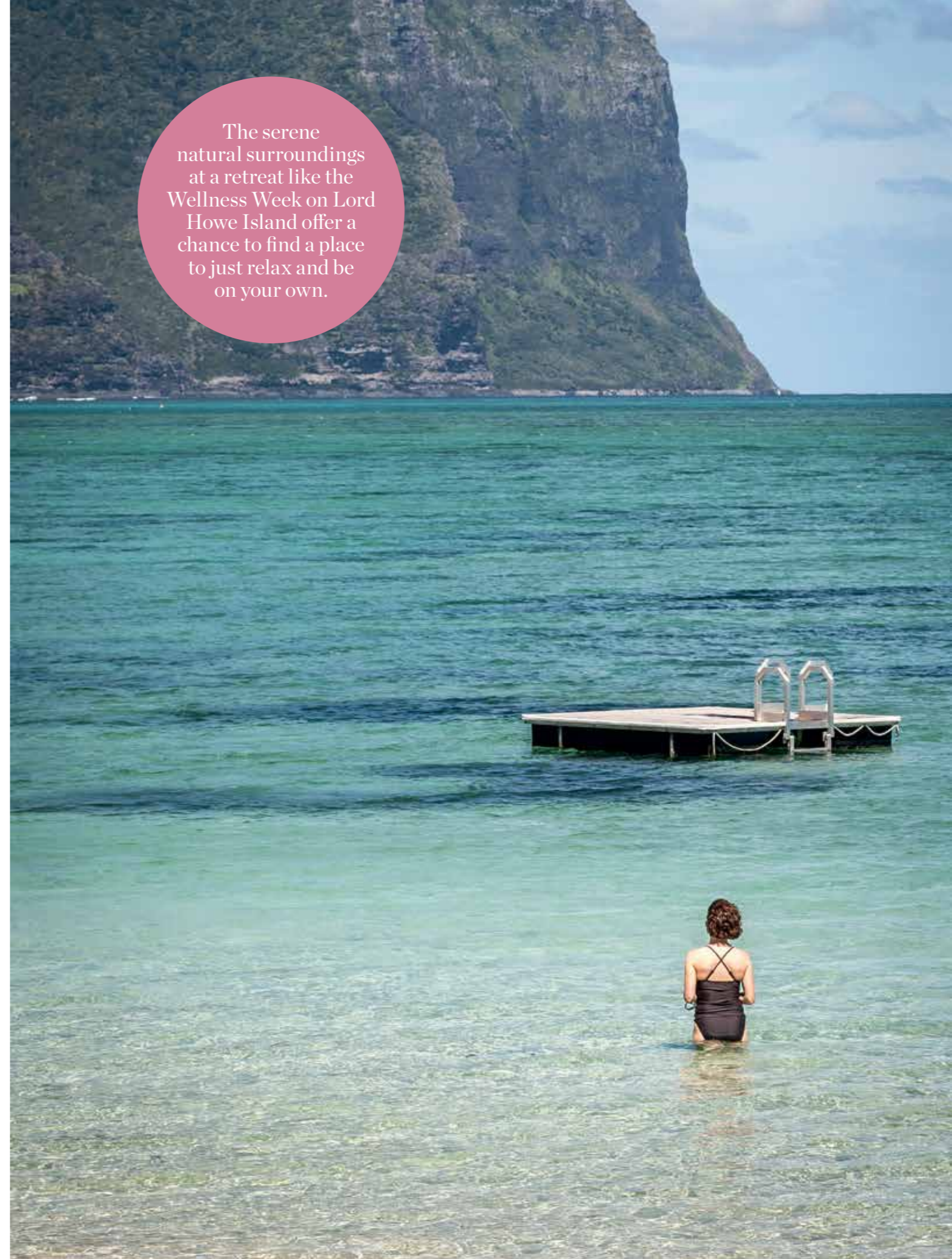
Kerr among other celebrities and even royalty. Along with delicious whole food, it offered daily adventure activities, including hiking and snorkelling, in the beautiful coral reef-fringed World Heritage island, just off the coast of NSW.

I must admit to feeling a little nervous on my way there. What sort of other people go to a wellness retreat? Will they be accomplished yogis? Will I be the worst in the class?

And so it arrived, day one: 15 of us sitting on our yoga mats, legs spread wide, bending forward. Charlotte bends so far that her forehead touches the floor. A sideways glance shows that some of the others are just like me, valiantly stretching forward like toddlers reaching for a stray toy, still half upright because that's as far as we can stretch. Charlotte gently comes along and gives our rounded backs a soft push. After an hour I'm physically spent, surprised by how much energy it takes.

So the breakfast buffet is a welcome sight – every kind of cereal, platters of fruit, fresh coffee – and there's a hot breakfast to follow. It's a hint of surprising things to come: generous lunch spreads and lavish three-course dinners, wine optional. ►

The serene natural surroundings at a retreat like the Wellness Week on Lord Howe Island offer a chance to find a place to just relax and be on your own.





At the Wellness Week on Lord Howe Island there's a variety of activities from daily yoga sessions with Charlotte Dodson (pictured opposite page and left) as well as walks and time for yourself to enjoy the stylish rooms and relax.

Hang on, doesn't this seem a contradiction to our wellness intentions? "It's wellness in moderation," explains Pinetrees co-owner Luke Hanson. Experience taught Luke that by removing all the guilty pleasures from the menu, guests were smuggling in contraband chocolate and treats from the general store 15 minutes up the road.

And it turns out that it's a much better life lesson than being put on a restricted diet. As the week goes on, we become attuned to our bodies and I'm declining delicious deserts because I know I won't feel as good as I should at 7am the next day, stretched out and doing downward facing dog.

Besides, there's plenty of activity to burn off any excess kilojoules. After breakfast comes the group fitness session led by Luke who, as an ecologist, leads us on fascinating walks through deep forests of native kentia palms, towering fig trees that are hundreds of years old, to pristine beaches where thousands of birds are noisily nesting and chicks are hatching. In the bright blue water schools of colourful fish shimmy through the shallows.

Then in the afternoon there are optional cooking classes with the head chef before we're back to the deck at 4pm for our afternoon yoga session.

I have to say, by the afternoon yoga session on day two, every muscle in my body feels as tight as a piano wire and as I try to will myself into this pose or that I think I'm about to burst into tears from exhaustion and frustration. But by day three, my body has started to adjust to this new routine. These tugs and stretches became a familiar feeling and yes, I can see I am making progress. All of us here work to extend ourselves and those at the top of the class are making heady breakthroughs. With coaxing from Charlotte, they're able to lift their

bodies into headstands like true yogis. We're proud of them, too – and cheer them on.

On the final afternoon we hike to the foot of Mount Gower for our final yoga session. The setting is majestic – the granite cliff face towering over us on one side and the sun twinkling on the ocean ahead. As we go through our routine, what had hurt on day one, my body now surrenders to.

But it's really now I'm home that I appreciate what I achieved in those five days. Going about my normal routine, so many things have become that bit easier; I'm sprinting up and down stairs and even sitting cross-legged on the floor like a smartypants. For me, the difference is noticeable. Besides, how could I work so hard for a week just to fall back into old habits? My week away has kickstarted new healthy routines – and yes, I am laying out my yoga mat at home at 7am each day.

Visit [pinetrees.com.au](http://pinetrees.com.au) and look for 'wellness weeks' under rates and packages.

#### HEADING TO A YOGA RETREAT?

To ensure you feel confident in your yoga practice before you head to a retreat, Charlotte Dodson is offering our readers a free month sign-up to her online yoga studio, with a variety of workouts from beginners to advanced, as well as practical tips, answers to common yoga questions and motivation, to help you prepare for yo yoga getaway. You can find Charlotte's online classes at [charlottedodson.tv/yoga](http://charlottedodson.tv/yoga). To access your free month trial, go to Promotions and enter the code PREVENTION (case sensitive).

PHOTOGRAPHY: LUKE HANSON

#### Fast fact

'Om', which is often chanted at the beginning and end of a yoga practice, has a calming sound that helps to focus the mind.

## How to prepare for a retreat

Every yoga retreat/getaway has its own unique 'character' and particular areas of focus. Here are a few tips to help you make the most of your own refresh experience:

#### SET A GOAL

"When deciding on a retreat, do your research and determine what you want to achieve," suggests Charlotte Dodson. Is it just to improve your yoga practice? Or maybe it's to also kickstart healthy eating habits? Perhaps it's for a total physical and mental re-boot? Knowing what you want out of your break beforehand allows to make choices while you're away that align with your aims. "Your retreat is meant to challenge you in some ways, and take you to the next level on a variety of fronts but you need to listen to your body and your own personal needs," Charlotte says.

#### PRACTISE YOGA BEFORE YOU GO

"Start bringing yoga postures and techniques into your routine before your retreat begins to ensure your body is up for the daily practice," Charlotte says. If you're not familiar with the main yoga postures and breathing techniques then join an introductory class, so when you're away you can get the most out of the intense practice.

#### PUT DOWN YOUR PHONE

Get ready for a digital detox. "When you're away, it's a good idea to sit with nature – and watch the ocean waves or sit under the trees," Charlotte says. "You need this space to disconnect and reconnect." In fact a lot of retreats either discourage use of mobiles or don't have wi-fi. You might need to start practising switching your phone off and being in the moment before you head off.

#### EASE YOUR WAY IN

Start getting into the mental and physical mindset in the weeks leading up to departure. If you're looking forward to quitting coffee and alcohol and eating clean, you want to avoid shocking your body in the first few days (caffeine withdrawal headaches are no fun!) by starting to gently reduce your intake of unhealthy foods and drinks beforehand.

#### MAKE IT STICK

"If you want a yoga practice that you can take away with you after your trip, make sure you make the most of having an instructor on hand to guide you," suggests Charlotte. While you have such undivided attention at your retreat ask as many questions as you like to be confident in what you've learned. **P**