

MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME

From winter snow to springtime glow,
OM editor *Martin D. Clark* heads to
family-run Poundon House for a weekend
of yoga rejuvenation and fireside ritual

Not everyone can escape early in the new year for a yoga retreat - finding the time to get away after the festive season can be a challenge - but, if you can, it's a fantastic way to set yourself up for the months ahead. Stretching out for a few hours a day, dining on healthful, nutritious food in fine company, all in a calming and supportive environment - it's the best way to shake off those cobwebs and get back into your groove. You'll be back to your best in no time at all.

The Winter Glow yoga retreat at Poundon House, about an hour's drive from London, was my chance to do just that. Two yoga sessions daily, meditation, *pranayama* (breath-work), plus the naturally healing Oxfordshire countryside that surrounds this plush, family-run retreat centre would be tempting anytime of the year. But as someone who really feels the chill of winter, the idea of restoring my inner glow on the mat, and then curling up with a good book by the fire, was too much to resist.

The venue itself is something special. Driving up to this Edwardian-era country house, you get a mini Downton Abbey feeling, although the history here is very real. Built in 1908, Poundon House was later requisitioned by the government during World War II to house evacuees. It also

hosted Winston Churchill's crack espionage unit, the Special Operations Executive. The house continued to be used by the government during the Cold War until the late 1970s before eventually being acquired by the Roscoe family, the current owners.

Sisters Natalie and Alicia now welcome guests to enjoy the house and grounds for weddings and other functions. And that includes yoga breaks too, something that's especially important for Alicia, a qualified yoga instructor herself (in 2011, she gave up a career as a lawyer to jet off to India). The pair have hired out their venue to visiting teachers for some time, but are now keen to creatively put their own stamp and feel on their yoga retreats...which includes a free goodie bag on arrival stuffed with healthy snacks and other products, a real treat when you get to your room.

In the flow

It's a formula that works very well. With a background in marketing, events and interior design, Natalie has crafted a beautiful space for guests to enjoy, with traditional furnishings in keeping with the house and its history, with its huge rooms and high ceilings. Oh, and the beds are amazingly soft and inviting, with special sleep-inducing



mattresses (from sleep experts Hypnos, apparently), so you're guaranteed a restful night.

The drawing room, with its roaring log fire, is the main hub, always a popular meeting point especially during the winter months. Remember, this is a big, old house, so it can get pretty cold. In fact, the hosts invite all guests to 'adopt' a blanket and a hot water bottle during their stay, definitely a bit of advice worth taking onboard.

Once you get into the yoga though things all work out fine. The Winter Glow retreat was headed by Saskia Price, who brought her own blend of Vinyasa Flow to a mixed ability group that included a few newcomers plus one or two other qualified teachers as well (including Alicia, who hates to miss a class when there's a retreat going on). A London-based teacher with the softest Scottish accent ever, Saskia takes her influences from the worlds of Ashtanga, Iyengar and Jivamukti, among other styles.

Every session was different, which is good, because you get a lot of yoga on any Poundon House retreat. On arrival day (Friday) there were two classes, on Saturday there were two classes, and on departure day (Sunday) another two classes - and that doesn't even include the *pranayama* and meditation sessions. That's certainly more yoga than I'd done on a weekend retreat before, but that's what I call value for money...and no one else was complaining either, despite a few aching bodies by the end (oh, don't worry, there's plenty of downtime too, with massage and other treatments to soothe those achy muscles, - plus those comfy beds, of course).





Saskia told me that the idea behind the retreat was to bring back warmth - through delicious warming foods, warming yoga, and hot teas served throughout - and to nurture people during their time at the house.

What I liked most about her classes was the emphasis on alignment. There was a great attention to detail and hands on adjustments under a trained eye. After one instruction, I thought my shoulders were already rested on the floor. Years of working at a desk, however, have clearly taken their toll - after a deliberate and significant 'shift' from our attentive teacher, my shoulders had finally made it onto the ground. And boy did I feel the benefit. It actually gave me a few ideas to take back home with me, essentially on taking pity on my poor 'desk' shoulders, giving them a little more yoga TLC than they'd hitherto been accustomed to, and seeking further ways to improve posture and alignment.

Detox kitchen

This particular retreat was also about giving people the time and space to step away from their normal lives, to come away refreshed and enlivened, cleansing out the old and moving into the new.

And, in the spirit of renewal and rejuvenation, we all set our intentions for the retreat after one yoga session, writing down something we'd like to manifest in the year ahead, and something we'd like to let go of. After wrapping them around little sticks found in the grounds outside, then tied with string, we set them aside at the front of the class.

The look of the yoga shala changes throughout the day. In the evenings, the sessions were candlelit, with a relaxing feel before bedtime; in the mornings, sunshine bursts




through the giant windows, providing a wake up call for all.

Away from the yoga room, food is pretty central to any Poundon House event as well. The team has linked up with some exciting collaborators for it retreats, such as The Detox Kitchen (detoxkitchen.co.uk) which designed all of the menus during my stay, for some tasty and beautifully presented dishes throughout the weekend.

Everything was vegetarian, there was a lot of variety on offer, and mealtimes were incredibly relaxed, a great time to get to know fellow guests around the big tables. The Poundon House kitchen staff can cater for all food tastes and intolerances, so you're in good hands too.

A stay at the house has got to include an exploration of the 10 acre landscaped grounds outside too, with its sweeping views of Oxfordshire. The whole group got together on Saturday afternoon for a long, muddy hike around the surrounding fields and farms, accompanied by the family dog, Beau. It's a healthy environment to be in, although your boots may need a good scrub at the end.

After a final, restorative yoga class on Sunday before leaving - great to ease those sore muscles again - we all took our notes and affirmations outside for a closing ceremony around a small fire pit where the group took turns to throw in their secret messages. It was a lovely way to sign off, before heading back out into the world.

The Poundon House experience - the warmth of real fires, dynamic yoga, other guests and your hosts, and, yes, even those hot water bottles - certainly restored my winter glow. Now back into the magazine swing of things I'm ready for spring and raring to go. 



FACT FILE

The Roscoe sisters, Alicia and Natalie, are keen to theme retreats at Poundon House to create a special and unique atmosphere for guests every time. Check online to stay up-to-date

Upcoming yoga retreat dates include:

March 18-20, 2016

April 29-May 1, 2016

Prices from £360pp for shared rooms

For more details visit: retreats.poundonhouse.com

For information on Saskia Price visit: saskiayoga.com



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