

BEATING BURNOUT

In the UK, more than a third of adults have reported extreme feelings of stress. Travel has always been an antidote for many, but now retreats are going one step further, offering tailored programmes to help people bounce back from burnout

WORDS: LUCY GILLMORE

Left: Quinta Carvalhas, a farm stay and luxury retreat in the Portuguese countryside

‘Burnout’ is a term we’ve become increasingly familiar with over the past decade. A report published at the beginning of 2024 by charity Mental Health UK revealed one in five people polled had to take time off work due to a mental health crisis. Another shocking statistic: with 35% of adults experiencing extreme stress, the UK could wind up a ‘burnt-out nation’. In a frenetic, increasingly inter-connected world, it can feel like there’s no escape.

Thankfully, more of us are recognising the symptoms and seeking help — and it’s out there. A growing number of wellness centres are offering tailored burnout breaks; examples include a 28-day immersive programme at Clinic Les Alpes in Switzerland and a digital detox at The Burnout Recovery Journey at the Sanctuary Beach Resort in Monterey County, California. The latter targets tech-fatigue with a ‘disconnect to reconnect’ approach, alongside sleep hypnosis.

Michelle Thomas, meanwhile, founded Portuguese retreat centre, Quinta Carvalhas. “Common threads of burnout are chronic fatigue, mental fog, detachment and a growing sense that even small tasks are overwhelming,” she explains. “Very commonly, people just ‘don’t feel like themselves’. They obsess over getting small unimportant tasks exactly right while neglecting the bigger things. That’s what we tackle here.”

In the UK, there’s Unplugged, with 20 off-grid cabins nationwide. Co-founder Hector Hughes says he experienced burnout himself while working on a tech start-up. After spending two weeks at a silent retreat in the Himalayas, he hatched a plan to create his own retreats, where guests completely switch off (you hand over your devices at check-in) and recharge surrounded by nature.

The formats of burnout retreats vary, with some focusing on talking therapies while others provide silence and seclusion to soothe strung-out spirits. What they all agree on, however, is the need for a nurturing and replenishing environment — a safe space. Below, we shine a spotlight on six of the best, from a mindfulness break in Portugal to a hiking sojourn in Canada.

1 Firmete Retreat, Borgo Egnazia, Puglia, Italy

‘Firmete means’ ‘take a break’ in the Puglian dialect, and the ethos of this new retreat revolves around creating a sanctuary for the mind. The concept forms part of a revitalised wellness programme at Borgo Egnazia, set in an ancient *borgo* (hamlet) in the peaceful Puglian countryside, in southern Italy. The five-day programme allows guests to pause, breathe and re-focus. Bespoke workshops have been designed to help them regain balance, free the mind from negativity and support cognitive function through activities such as juggling and outdoor yoga. These are blended with more traditional approaches such as a massage and meditation, while sensory walks and forest bathing among olive trees encourage guests to reconnect with nature.

The five-day retreat costs from €4,720 (£3,900) per person on a full-board basis. borgoegnazia.com

2 Build your own Burnout Retreat, Quinta Carvalhas, Portugal

This farm-turned-luxury-retreat is the kind of place where you can pad to breakfast in your pyjamas. Owner, yoga teacher and reiki master Michelle Thomas explains that guests arrive expecting to be active and do things, but as they find inner peace and stillness, they gradually let go. It takes a minimum of three days’ deep rest, she says, before energy levels rise and they have the mental space to engage. Quinta Carvalhas is an hour from Lisbon in the rolling green Ribatejo countryside. The team helps guests put together their own tailor-made retreat, choosing from activities such as sound healing sessions, yoga, meditation, reiki and art and equine therapy (utilising the healing power of horses). Swimming in the sprawling saltwater pool, listening to the birds sing, watching the sun set over the pond and feeling the earth beneath their feet also helps to reground and reconnect people with both nature and themselves.

Prices start from around €720 (£595) per person for a three-night stay on a full-board basis. quintacarvalhas.com

3 Wellbeing Escapes, Tofte Manor, Bedfordshire

Wellness travel pioneer Stella Photi founded Wellbeing Escapes after a high-flying career led her to experience burnout first hand. She sees it as a modern-day epidemic. “A survey we conducted last year showed that 53% of our clients named it as a top reason for booking with us,” she says. “I believe burnout comes from normalising or pushing through chronic stress symptoms, and we’re seeing a growing demand for specialist retreats to help beat it.” So much so that in March she’s launching an annual two-day retreat to teach preventative techniques and share her experience and expertise. She’s bringing in experts such as transformational coach and author Claudia Roth. The retreat will be held at 17th-century Tofte Manor, surrounded by a 50-acre estate. Dedicated to self-care, it will show how to reduce chronic stress, slow down and guard against burnout. Activities will include mindful movement, such as restorative yoga and qigong, stress management, seasonal eating and journaling workshops, plus pre-sleep sound baths to calm the nervous system.

The two-night retreat runs from 14-16 March and costs £595 per person full-board in a shared room. wellbeingescapes.com

4 Health Reset Retreat, Mountain Trek, British Columbia, Canada

‘Health, happiness and hiking’ is the promise of this retreat, set in British Columbia’s majestic mountains. For the past 30 years, from a base in a pine-cradled lodge, Mountain Trek has been helping people reboot their minds and bodies. Created as a place to unplug and recharge, it encourages guests to start the day with a green smoothie and detoxifying lemon and ginger tea. From there, expect daily three- to four-hour hikes, functional fitness classes, lifestyle talks, sunrise yoga, guided relaxation sessions and therapeutic massages. There’s no alcohol, caffeine or sugar on site and the combination of physical exertion, recovery massages and mental health discussions combine to help guests return home revitalised, their physical, emotional and mental health rebalanced. *A one-week Health Reset Package costs from £5,250 per person on an all-inclusive basis. mountaintrek.com*

5 Silent Immersion Programme, Maamungau Resort, The Maldives

Disconnecting from the noise and distractions of the modern world can relieve the symptoms of adrenal burnout. The Maamunagau Resort in the Maldives has recognised the healing power of peace and quiet, and the Hermit Days Silent Immersion programme allows guests to sink into stillness surrounded by the beauty of the Raa Atoll. Days are spent in privacy and seclusion, while a dedicated wellness mentor designs a personalised programme of activities and mindfulness practices. Yoga, meditation and spa treatments promote relaxation and help guests reconnect with themselves. “Our silent retreats were inspired by a desire to create a sanctuary for those seeking a break from their busy lives,” wellness mentor Seema Rana explains. “This state of quietness allows individuals to reflect on their thoughts and emotions in a focused manner. By integrating mindfulness practices and holistic wellness approaches, we aim to support people in achieving a deeper sense of peace.” *Villas from £780 per night based on two sharing. maldives.intercontinental.com*

6 Stress Reset and Burnout Recovery Retreat, Zual Wellness Resort, Qatar

A desert-meets-coast oasis on the northern tip of Qatar, the Middle Eastern outpost of legendary Thai wellness resort Chiva-Som is low-slung and honey-hued, with architecture designed to resemble a traditional Qatari village. Chiva-Som’s wellbeing philosophy believes that a balanced mind, body and spirit makes people thrive. Here, the team look to achieve this by blending traditional Arabic and Islamic medicine (TAIM) with modern therapies, and the personalised burnout retreats start with a wellness consultation. From there, therapists create a targeted, tailor-made stress reset programme. Designed to help guests recuperate from mental fatigue and make sustainable lifestyle changes, each day features a mix of holistic activities and relaxing treatments such as the Tadleek massage with heated stones and herbal oils to help lymphatic drainage. Add this to meditation, pranayama breathing, reiki and the slow rhythmic movements of Tai Chi, guests learn to switch off. *From £650 per person per night. chivasom.com* 

Clockwise from top left: Vair Spa is immersed in the calm of the Puglian countryside; Quinta Carvalhas offers retreats and workshops; many retreats suggest having time away from your phone; yoga is a popular way to start the day at Quinta Carvalhas

**EXPERT ADVICE
Tackling burnout yourself**

Michelle Thomas, self-development coach and founder of Quinta Carvalhas in Portugal, offers tips on how to manage burnout at home

Pause and listen to your body. Allow yourself time to step away from the noise and truly listen to what you mneed.

Prioritise small moments of stillness. Even a few minutes of mindfulness or time in nature can help.

Reevaluate what fills you up. Plan things that you wouldn’t usually do, connect with friends and nourish your body with good food.

Seek tiny moments of joy throughout the day with things that are easy to achieve. This way, the day will end with you feeling positive and energised.

Colour therapy works, so wear red or orange, which have been shown to boost energy levels.

IMAGES: BORG EGNAZIA; REBECCA HOPE PHOTOGRAPHY

