

The laid-back retreat so restorative I've returned three times

Columnist Alice Thomson loves the chilled Yeotown escapes in Devon and Madeira so much, she has had to limit her stays to one per year — each with transformative effects



Yeotown Madeira is on the sunniest part of the island, in the Arco da Calheta area

Alice Thomson

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I think I have found my perfect retreat. Downward dogs, pigeons and lizards never excited me. They could have been called hibernating dormouse and I wouldn't have wanted to do them. I didn't get the point of yoga holidays, tying myself in pretzels while eating lettuce leaves and suffering lion's breath. Nor did I want to

be shouted at if I couldn't perform 50 press-ups and burpees at some prickly Californian desert boot camp.

The last time I went to a spa was a decade ago. It was in the home counties, they had calorie labels on the cottage cheese, I felt oppressed by all the dripping pine trees and found the aggressive therapists in white coats stressful as I tried to avoid the colonic irrigation appointments. Chewing stale rolls at a sanatorium in Austria didn't sound any more appealing. So, I thought, like with cruises, I would be one of those people who nodded politely while others eulogised about their wellbeing holidays.

But then I discovered Yeotown and I am now so addicted I have been three times. It's five days long and you only have to make one choice — Devon or Madeira. I've been to both. I've had to limit myself to once a year. I've no idea why they are transformative, maybe because they are so intense yet relaxed and the food is phenomenal. I now understand how easy it is for Gwyneth with her personal Goop chefs. Or maybe it's because the owners, Simon and Mercedes Sieff, a surfer and a yoga guru, are chilled people who want you to have a great time while becoming a little more flexible, toned, detoxed and calm. They have spent 15 years refining their retreats, and it's easy to see why everyone from singers to CEOs, the bereaved and the stressed out keep coming back for more.



Devon Yeotown is Simon's old home, and the family still live next door to the 17th-century farmhouse near Barnstaple, with its dovecote, apple orchards and the Yeo River wending its way through the wildflower meadows below the hot tub. Meals, often from the garden, are in the beamed kitchen or on the rose terrace. Bedrooms are scattered among the old farm's barns and there are cosy rooms with stacks of books and squishy sofas. The walks are along sensational clifftop paths, through narrow combes and past smugglers' coves with fabulous wild swimming on deserted hidden beaches. Cycle trips are along disused Victorian railway lines and there are surf lessons available. Weight training is on the lawn with Meg, who is so enthusiastic and expert at sculpting muscle that I still see her for Zoom classes once a week. A singing class left us all sobbing, it was so cathartic.

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Which retreat is better? It depends whether you want nurturing or adventure. Devon feels more cossetting and womb-like, Madeira more of an escape. I went to Madeira in January when the trees in London were bare and the pavements slippery. The three-hour flight was filled with pensioners. I was reasonably confident that I was already fitter than most of the other passengers until I saw the other Yeotowners, eight women and a man who was knitting. They were stocking up on their final caffeine and chocolate shots, knowing that we'd all been told to cut down on gluten, sugar, dairy, meat, coffee and wine, and were wearing hardcore Camelbaks and walking boots. I

realised I may not have paid enough attention to the geography field trip-style packing list.

Madeira is winter sunshine. We drove to the Yeotown house high up in the hills, which the Sieffs bought when they ended up on the island in lockdown with their two young daughters. It's on the sunniest, southwest part of the island in the Arco da Calheta area. Each guest room looks over the ocean, the estate is surrounded by lush green forest and has a levada running alongside its entrance to channel the island's water. There's a medicinal garden, chickens, a vegetable patch and hammocks.



Yeotown Madeira is situated high up in the hills

It looks like a wholesome *Love Island* set, with an idyllic swimming pool and fruit trees and the addition of raised herb beds and a cockerel crowing in the morning. My room was above the kitchen so I could smell the spirulina pancakes for breakfast while looking out over the sea. I could also creep down in the night to look for snacks. On the mirror someone had written “Alice, patience is power”. As Patience was my mother's name and she had died the previous year, it felt strangely fitting as I snuggled under vast blankets.

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The aim is to relax so there are no timetables or choices. You can scan your phone at the end of the day and you can skip anything to snooze if withdrawal symptoms are sapping your energy. The whole point is to let go and not to feel guilty. Meals are all salt, sugar, wheat and preservative-free, and vegan, except for optional breakfast eggs and occasional fish.

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The one event no one wanted to miss was Mercedes's yoga at 7.30am. She is kind, thoughtful and staggeringly supple; doing a headstand suddenly became easy. After breakfast, there were three-hour walks across the island, past waterfalls and through tunnels chiselled into the rocks, as well as treks to the highest volcanic peaks and deep into ancient forests, stopping by natural bathing pools and insane waterfalls, all accompanied by a "little bag of disappointments" — a few nuts and seeds, though no one minded if you asked for extra energy balls. We'd be hiking in the clouds one hour and swimming in the sea the next. I discovered I only needed trainers, old T-shirts and leggings, a swimsuit and a raincoat for showers; it was all about comfort rather than style.

In the afternoons there was strength training and stretching among the geckos in the garden. But everyone was waiting for the massages. Each therapist had a signature: one might throw you over their back, another knead your knots with their knees, perform reiki or reflexology — everyone wanted to extend their hour.



A room at the Madeira outpost

Specialists arrive throughout the year: Ironman champions, psychotherapists, sleep and nutrition experts, gut health tsars. My stay happened to coincide with menopause week

with Mariella Frostrup, so there were fabulous conversations about pessaries and HRT that left Simon reeling while we tucked into cauliflower wings, mushroom miso broth with crispy tofu and sunshine cake with orange cashew cream, and learnt how to make their seed loaf flavoured with coconut oil and maple syrup.

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At the end we are told about *ichigo ichie*, a Japanese proverb that means “one time, one meeting”, and the idea that no two encounters can be replicated. Nor can any two Yeotowns reproduce the same experience. But everyone relaxed more deeply than they had all year, rebalanced their priorities, overslept, unwound, bonded, learnt new skills, stretched their muscles and felt energised. I now do yoga three times a week and then have several coffees. New habits are easier to make than old ones are to break.

Alice Thomson was a guest of Yeotown, which has five nights' all-inclusive in Devon from £2,450, or in Madeira from £2,750 (yeotown.com)

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