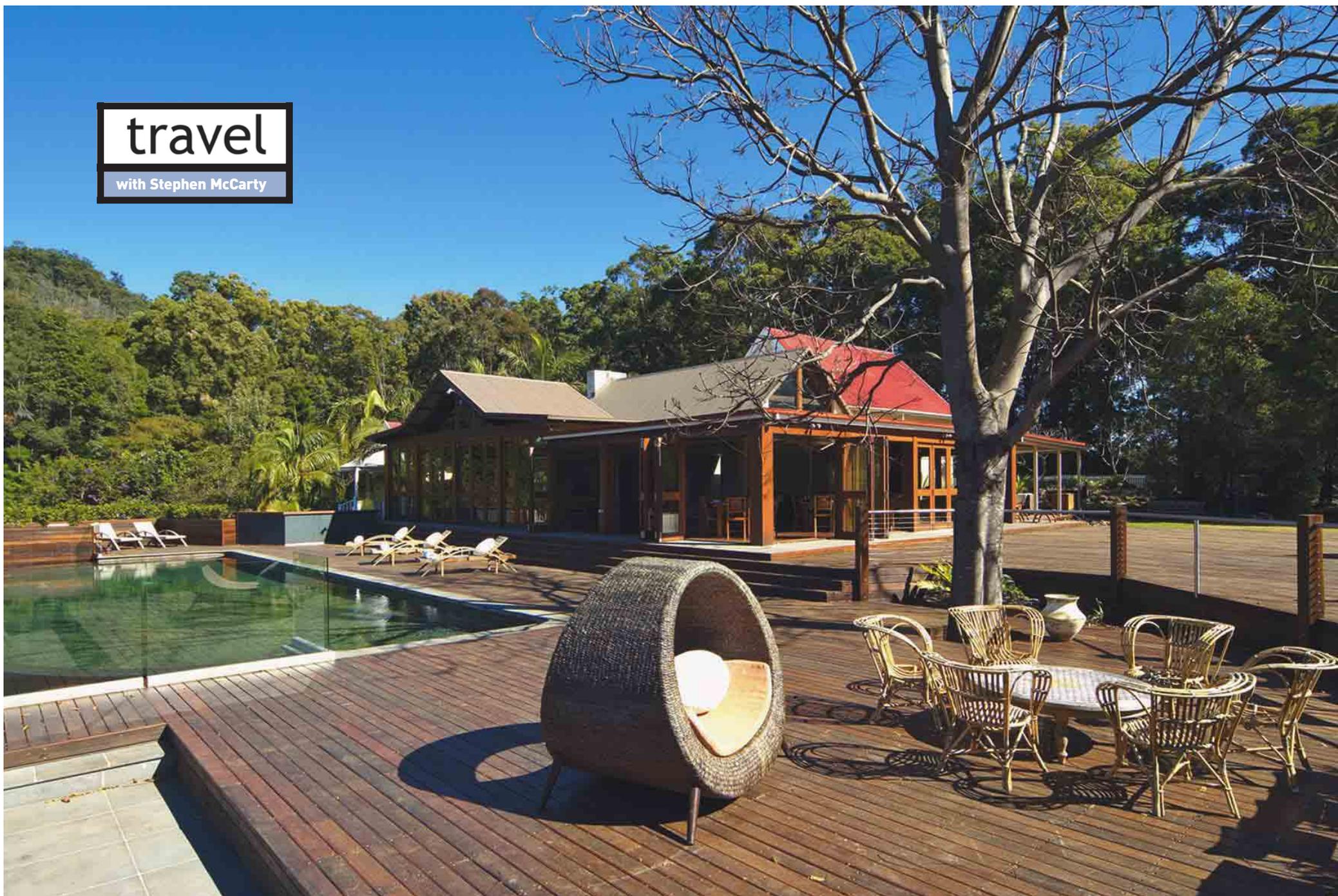


travel

with Stephen McCarty



Retreat and surrender

Detox programmes these days are more about time-out than torture. Rachael Oakes-Ash and her demanding alter ego inspect the best in new Australian spas – and are relieved to find a healthy regard for rest and recreation.

When visiting Australia, serious types with a penchant for self-flagellation often gravitate towards the five-day programme at Camp Eden, Queensland, with its punishing, tree-top, rope-swinging courses worthy of the special services. But Australia is experiencing a surge in spending of the detox dollar, with a number of destination retreats having opened recently.

My mission? To boldly go to Gaia Retreat and Spa in the Byron Bay hinterland, New South Wales, for three nights, then spend three more at Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat, near the Gold Coast. My alter ego, Mary Millionaire, is not impressed at the idea of cut grass and water for lunch ... until I inform her Gaia is owned by Olivia Newton-John and her Hollywood kudos may rub off.

Byron Bay has long been a celebrity haven. The Rolling Stones, Ben Harper, Tom Cruise and Richard Branson have all been spotted on the balcony of luxury hotel Rae's on Watego's. Byron Bay has also long been viewed as an alternative paradise for those seeking spiritual enlightenment through natural therapies – or the mushrooms found in the hills. Gaia Retreat and Spa sits in those hills and legend has it the land was used by indigenous female elders, which is fitting considering Gaia means Mother Earth in spiritual speak. Newton-John and her best friend and business partner, Gregg Cave, teamed up with two silent partners to purchase this slice of rolling terrain and set up organic camp.

Pictures: Rachael Oakes-Ash; Paul Broben/FlP

When it comes to fuel, Gaia, more “time-out retreat” than boot camp, focuses on an all-organic menu that doesn't skimp on flavour or portions, with ingredients picked fresh from the garden. Guests are served three courses a night at white-linen-covered tables in the main dining pavilion. There's no communal dining, unless you meet folks with whom you fancy breaking bread, then it's up to you to invite them to join. Wine is served on the basis that we're all adults and able to monitor our own intake. Naturally, Mary Millionaire acts like a child and orders by the bottle.

Yoga is held daily at the civilised hour of 7.30am and the only other scheduled activity is a tai chi, meditation or similar class at the end of the day. Both are optional. The rest of the hours are for guests to do with what they will: tramp the surrounding bushland, hang in the hammocks or lie on the hillside day beds, book in hand. All meals and snacks are included so I stay close to home rather than venture out to nearby Bangalow for naughty coffee and cake. Instead, I haul myself onto a mountain bike and explore the lychee farms nearby, inhaling the pure air.

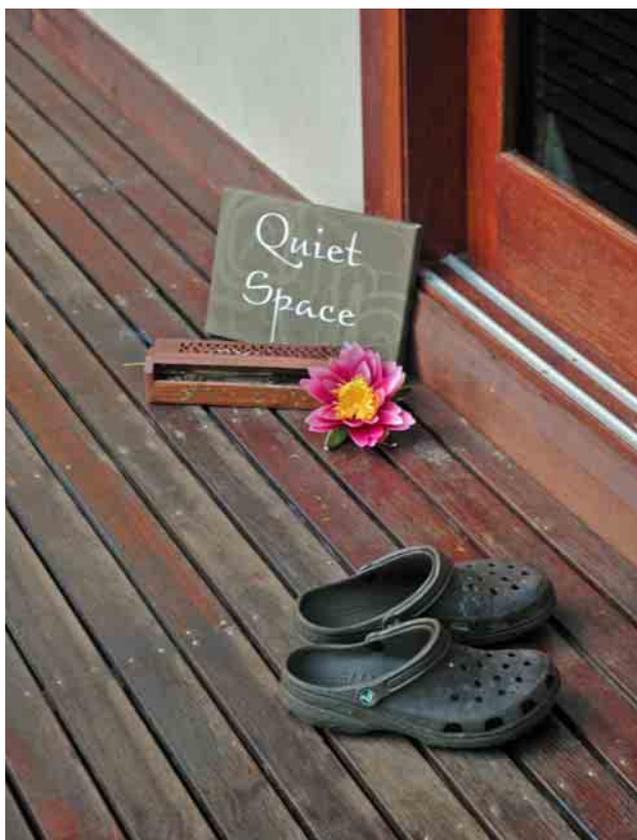
There are two menus at Gaia: the dining menu and the Amala Day Spa menu. The latter rivals the Bible in size, with 32 therapists available to pummel, pound and pamper. I overrule Mary Millionaire's desire for the A\$400 (HK\$2,350), four-hour Gaia Goddess treatment and book in for the 30-minute Indian Head Massage for A\$55.

Retreats based on health and well-being traditionally attract more females than males, but at Gaia it's a mixed experience. Two loved-up couples keep to themselves while a solo male on sabbatical for four days joins in with the mothers taking time out from family duties. Bonding takes little time when mobile phones, televisions, BlackBerries and caffeine are left at the door.

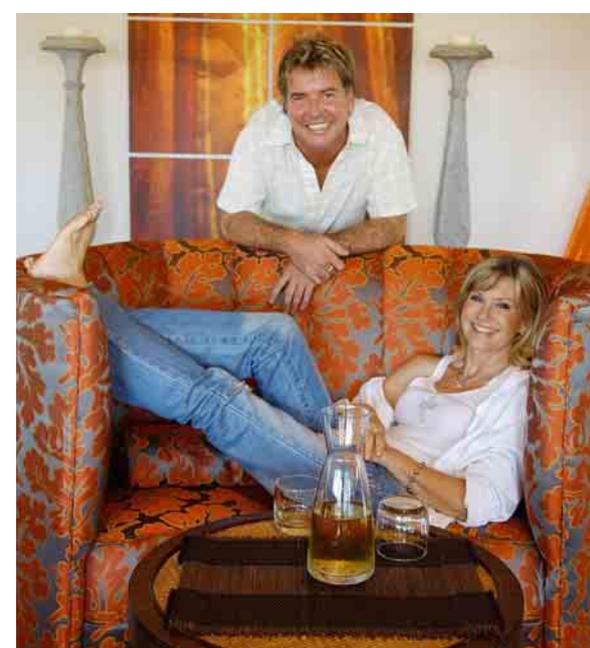
Just as Mary Millionaire is lulled into a sense of organic security, late-night wine glass in Amala Day Spa-manicured hand, her time is up and she must make haste to Gwinganna to experience the other side of the detox coin.

Health retreats attract two types: those who want to lose weight and those who want to de-stress. In each camp there are those who trust themselves and those who don't. Those who don't are drawn to the boot-camp section, where contraband is confiscated and chocolate handed in at the entrance. I've never trusted myself; chocolate simply has no place in my fridge, because it's gone by the time the packet is opened. I trust Mary Millionaire even less; “just the one” glass of bubbly turns into a bottle turns into shouting the entire bar.

The Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat was made for me and Mary, even though she enters kicking and screaming. When caffeine, sugar, gluten, nicotine, alcohol and electronics are taken away there is nothing left for the human being to do but gossip as the transfer shuttle bus



Clockwise from far left: Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat; the emphasis is on peace at Gaia Retreat and Spa; a daybed made for two at Gaia; the resort's regimen isn't without sweet indulgences; Olivia Newton-John with friend and Gaia business partner Gregg Cave; a room at Gwinganna.



deposits the weekend's victims in the bushland village. Guests are not encouraged to leave the property once they have checked in and a security gate makes it difficult for a meander down to the shops, which are several kilometres away anyway.

Each day we haul ourselves out of bed pre-sunrise for some body-thawing tai chi, a morning walk designed to challenge a Himalayan sherpa, breakfast, more exercise, a workshop, lunch and then dreamtime. This amounts to three hours of bliss every afternoon, which is spent having hot-stone massages and the like in the day spa, or lounging in the sun. After dinner, it's time for bed in the deluxe accommodation, minus room service and television.

According to Gwinganna I am mature for my age: almost 10 years too mature if you believe the machine I am hooked up to on day two. It measures my muscle mass (above average), quality of muscle (outstanding) and my fat mass (40 per cent of my body, for which I blame Mary). The figures are fed through a software program and voila! My "physical age" is revealed. Apparently I'm 47, although I don't remember celebrating my 40th. My birth certificate has me at 38 but my body lets me down.

The emphasis at Gwinganna is on learning about one's habits and making changes to help promote good health and longevity. I'm happy to try anything, especially if it will reduce my "physical age", but I draw the line at the garlic

suppository suggested by my massage therapist when I inform her I feel a cold coming on.

Gwinganna is set up like a heritage town, with an original Queensland general store, church and school buildings, which have been relocated to the hilltop property to take advantage of the ocean view. Prospective visitors should stand by for the multimillion-dollar, two-storey gymnasium, private billabong spa pavilions and all-new day spa coming next year. The retreat spells luxury living with a casual, open-deck feeling and groovy stone fire pit just begging for marshmallows ... or it would be if they were allowed.

Don't tell Mary, but I'm going back and am even looking forward to my seven-day Gwinganna detox this month. I suspect I'll find her at Gaia.

Getting there: Gaia Retreat and Spa, 933 Fernleigh Road, Brooklet, New South Wales, Australia (tel: 61 2 6687 1216; www.gaiaretreat.com.au). Qantas (www.qantas.com.hk) flies from Hong Kong to Sydney; Jetstar (www.jetstar.com.au) flies from Sydney to Ballina, 20 minutes' drive from Gaia. A three-night Renew package costs from A\$1,095 a person, twin share, including all meals, a day-spa treatment and transfers. Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat, 192 Syndicate Road, Tallebudgera, Queensland (tel: 61 7 5589 5000; www.gwinganna.com). Virgin Blue (www.virginblue.com.au) flies from Sydney to the Gold Coast (Coolangatta), 20 minutes' drive from Gwinganna. A three-night Healthy Escape package costs from A\$899 a person, twin share, including all meals, two spa treatments and transfers.