

GOOD AS GOLD

Long associated with beautiful beaches, glittering nightlife and entertaining theme parks, Queensland's Gold Coast is now shaping up as one of Australia's best wellness destinations, too.

WORDS BY KATE SYMONS

I feel ridiculous. Eyes closed, step-tap, step-tap, step-tapping in time with the beat, as if I'm a nervous 12-year-old at her first school dance. Instead, I'm an awkward 39-year-old, participating in her first 'transformational dance party'.

The 'party' is being hosted by Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat, the renowned Gold Coast resort tucked in the hinterland just 15 minutes from the ever-tempting waves of Burleigh Heads. Each morning at Gwinganna, following the daily qi gong ritual on the lawn, guests are invited to choose between three activities. On this occasion, I am immediately drawn to instructor Ness despite, or perhaps because of, the fact I had never heard of a transformational dance party before.

Ness describes the movement and meditation session we're participating in as "a transformative journey using music, dance and mindfulness to connect, liberate and

celebrate your authentic self." At the very least, I am intrigued. I have, after all, come to the Gold Coast to explore its wellness credentials.

With sun, sand and surf in abundance, plus the lush hinterland just minutes away, it's hardly surprising to see health prioritised on this popular strip of southeast Queensland. Yoga studios are ubiquitous, healthy dining is on trend, and the permeating beach culture endorses activity of all kinds. Yet, as a wellness destination, the Gold Coast is just starting to pick up pace.

THE WELLNESS EXPERTS

Gwinganna is at the forefront of the shift. Positioned on more than 200 hectares in the Tallebudgera Valley, Gwinganna has enjoyed loyal patronage since opening in 2006. More recently, and certainly influenced by the unique challenges of 2020, the retreat's offering is appealing to the masses.

The Gold Coast gets 300 days of sunshine annually.

Above: Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat's awe-inspiring 1,000-year-old fig tree is tucked away in the rainforest.

"The main thing we see is more new guests – people trying a retreat experience [for the first time] and seeking the support from wellness experts," says Gwinganna marketing manager, Tracy Willis. "Supporting guests with emotional wellbeing and stress management is a key focus and has been in demand in the last year. Requests for our emotional wellbeing therapies have increased significantly."

In Gwinganna's pavilion – a light, open space built with reclaimed timbers and offering sweeping views – Ness asks us to close our eyes and to invite our "child self" to join the party. The request unlocks discomfort in me, but I am determined to embrace unfamiliar territory. More familiar is the sound of *Celebrate* by Kool & The Gang, the opening song of the class and one that demands movement.

And so, I move. Clumsily. Self-consciously. No-one is looking, but that somehow makes it weirder. As if reading my mind, Ness reminds us to

"let go." At times, I find myself tapping into the song lyrics – using the narrative to inspire my thinking and, in turn, my movement. So, when the soulful vocals of Damon Trueitt start serenading me with *Change is Gonna Come*, I believe him.

NEW BEGINNINGS

Inspired in part by the year that was and in part by an impending milestone birthday, I have been craving and, in fact, actively seeking change for some time. I am ready for a slower, more considered, yet equally passionate life, and I have been trialling a few tactics. Yoga is one.

It isn't the first time I've tried to promote the ancient practice from sporadic to habitual in my life, but the Gold Coast delivers fresh motivation, courtesy of Pure Aloha Yoga. I meet founder Sarni'a on the banks of Tallebudgera Creek and am immediately buoyed by her bright smile, as well as the bright sunshine –

WELLNESS ON WATER

Pure Aloha Yoga
SUP yoga is just the beginning. Pure Aloha also delivers regular SUP, SUP fitness, SUP surfing, yoga, stretch, and tumble classes. Special community events are held regularly, too. purealohayoga.co
Seaway Kayaking Tours

Kayak through crystal-clear waters before exploring the beauty that lies beneath with a snorkelling session at Wave Break Island's reef. No experience necessary. seawaykayakingtours.com.au

Walkin' On Water

With more than 70 kilometres of coastline, there are plenty of waves worth riding on the Gold Coast. For beginner, intermediate or performance lessons, Walkin' on Water's pristine Greenmount Beach in Coolangatta location is a dream spot to hang ten. walkinonwater.com

Yoga Asanas by the Sea

The Australian School of Meditation & Yoga hosts a variety of classes in a variety of locations, but only the weekly Saturday morning class at Burleigh Heads will put you face to face with the Big Blue. asmy.org.au

the day has been grey and wet until now. After a crash course in stand-up paddleboarding (SUP), I am off, gliding over the sparkling water and headed towards the mangroves, where the Pure Aloha lesson continues.

I've seen lithe yogis make shapes on stand-up paddleboards before. Putting myself in the picture always seemed like a setu bandha sarvangasana – or, bridge – too far. But Sarni'a's instruction is gentle, not unlike the sea breeze kissing my skin, and I am managing to follow along. Yes, I fall in. Three times. But in between falls, I feel strong and (mostly) steady. And when the rain starts to fall again, this time while I am upturned in downward dog, glancing downstream, I feel connected to nature from every angle.

The rain isn't always this welcome, particularly when it threatens my plans to soar above the Gold Coast in a hot air balloon. Thankfully, Murray at Go Ballooning is the determined type. Armed with his trusty rain app, he is convinced a break in the weather is en route and he turns out to be spot on. Floating over the green and red patchwork of the region's expansive hinterland is just reward for the rain delay, so when a rainbow appears, beaming from the now-blue sky to the verdant countryside, it feels like a gift.

I have barely touched down before I am headed skyward again. Located on the 77th storey of the Q1 building in Surfers Paradise, SkyPoint observation deck offers 360-degree views of this glittering slice of the sunshine state. New York, according to signage, is more than 15,000 kilometres east. It is a reminder of what we're missing under travel restrictions, yet the crashing waves 270 metres below are a reminder of just how lucky we are.

Two days later, when Whitney Houston's unmistakable voice belts out *Higher Love* in the Gwinganna pavilion, there is a sense of cohesion between the previous day's lofty exploits and the grounding experience in which I am immersed.

The lush hinterland, a tranquil creek, the air up there – these are locations ready-made for wellness. A warehouse in a strip mall on the Gold Coast Highway is not. All the more credit, then, to Alexis Dyson, co-founder of Soak Bathhouse, a recent addition to Mermaid Beach. With its indoor and outdoor mineral baths, hot spas, and saunas, Soak offers wellness in smaller bursts than the traditional

Where To Stay



Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat

Nestled in the Gold Coast hinterland, this award-winning, Eco Tourism-certified retreat has a host of wellness packages. The 33-room Spa Sanctuary is pure bliss. gwinganna.com



JW Marriott Gold Coast Resort

Fresh from a \$35-million refurbishment, the JW Marriott rooms and suites are built for comfort and indulgence. The resort's Teppanyaki restaurant, Misono is a hoot. marriott.com



QT Gold Coast

QT delivers character-filled hotels and the Gold Coast incarnation is no different. Bright, quirky décor befits the neighbourhood and on-site dining is worth staying in for. qthotels.com/gold-coast



Bon Sol

A two-bedroom apartment on Burleigh's beachfront with Anna Spiro interiors, Pandanus is a truly luxe private stay. The first offering from Bon Sol, a second apartment is in the works. bonsol.com.au

Where To Eat



Commune

Quaint as you like, despite its highway-adjacent position, Commune puts organic produce in the spotlight.

facebook.com/Commune-188007077908552/



BSKT

Aiming to drive a “health revolution”, BSKT is a superfood hub, delivering delicious, health-focused food in Mermaid Beach.

bskt.com.au



Omeros Bros

A Gold Coast institution, Omeros Bros has built its glowing reputation by serving the freshest of fresh seafood for more than four decades.

omerosbros.com



Greenhouse Canteen

For plant-based dining so good, even carnivores want in on the action, visit Greenhouse Canteen in Miami. Serving Australian wine and supporting local breweries.

greenhousecanteen.com/miami



A sunset walk at Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat provides the perfect opportunity to commune with nature.

retreat experience. Casual sessions start at \$49 for a 90-minute soak. Says Alex: “We wanted to create a wellness experience for people that was accessible in terms of the time and money they needed to invest, and also the location it was in.”

Only a fence stands between Soak’s two mineral spas and the heaving Gold Coast Highway, a fact betrayed by the ambience. Spa jets and chill-out music is the dominant soundscape, a few stationary cranes in nearby Broadbeach the main signs of urban life. Soak also features co-working facilities, a yoga studio and private treatment rooms, including an infrared sauna.

After bobbing up and down the magnesium-infused indoor pool, I take some time to sweat in one of the outdoor spas, set to a balmy 38 degrees. As if to goad me, the cold plunge pool is just a few metres away, and while I almost freeze with fear at the very idea of 12-degree water, I am lured by the shock value. And shock is the word for it. The chill shoots up my body, forcing my chin to the ground and a piercing squeak from my throat. I am in the dry, red-cedar sauna faster than you can say ‘frostbite’. It will take a little practice before I can reap the health benefits of cold water immersion. Baby steps.

I AM LIGHT

Before class, Ness offers a tissue box. “I don’t want to scare you,” she says. “But it can be an emotional experience for some people.” Well, I’m scared.

Dancing in front of these strangers is one thing. Crying in front of them is quite another. I tuck the tissue under my yoga mat, which now marks my dance space, and inhale my caution.

Speaking later, Ness explains: “[The dance party] can be an emotional experience that may trigger

tears, because it will release everything [participants have] been holding onto. It can also be emotional to have the felt experience of self-love.

“Guests always have a great time, as they discover that ... they have fun dancing with their child and teenage self ... particularly if the child self is the one to lead the way, with absolutely no inhibitions.”

An ethereal tune I don’t recognise begins to play. I later learn it is India. Arie’s *I Am Light*, and while it is not to my usual taste, the lyrics land.

I am not the voices in my head ... Or any of the things that caused me pain. I don’t cry, but I understand the temptation. Ness invites us to repeat the mantra: “I am light”. I oblige, quietly at first – an effort to avoid embarrassment – but louder with each turn, as confidence builds.

GOURMET INDULGENCE

‘I am light’ is a mantra I could have used earlier in the week when faced with the spread at Bazaar, the COVID-friendly buffet restaurant at QT Gold Coast. The smorgasbord of global flavours is an eye-popping sight and poses a happy conundrum: Where to start. Where to finish is a much easier prospect, although actually finishing proves troublesome. The dessert station overflows with picture-perfect sweet treats and I find it hard to stop. Wellness is about balance, too, right? More in keeping with the wellness assignment, lunch the following day is at Commune, a charming cafe with an organic focus in Burleigh Heads. I cleanse myself of the previous evening’s sins with a nutty acai bowl and mood booster smoothie, flavoured by cacao nibs, medjool dates, almond butter, banana and coconut flesh. I am light, so to speak, once more.

I am lighter still that afternoon when I float out of the Gwinganna spa, slick with oil following 80 dreamy minutes of aromatherapy massage, the ‘Abhyang Fusion’. And later, when I board my flight home, grateful for these few days of Gold Coast bliss, but wishing I had a few more, the light glows again. Self-care has a funny way of achieving that. 

“WHEN A RAINBOW APPEARS, IT FEELS LIKE A GIFT.”

VISIT MINDFOOD.COM

The Sunshine Coast’s food scene begins in the rich, volcanic soil where a thriving modern agricultural industry grows. Then it finds its way to you, blessed by sunshine and a mild climate. mindfood.com/sunshine-coast-food