

A man in a dark jacket is hiking through tall, dry grass in a mountainous landscape. In the background, there are snow-capped mountains and a blue lake. The title 'wellness warrior' is overlaid on the image in large, bold letters. 'wellness' is in a bright yellow-green color, and 'warrior' is in white with a slight shadow effect.

# wellness warrior

Health retreats are only for chicks, right? Forty-one kilometres of gruelling hiking in the New Zealand high country, several high-intensity workouts, 10 hardcore yoga sessions, five days on a paleo-vegan diet and one Pilates class later, *MF*'s **Ashley Gray** begs to differ.

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***Uphill battle:*** *MF*'s Ashley Gray hauls arse flanked by the Southern Alps.

# ● “On the mat is

a reflection of who you are off it,” lilted yoga teacher Rafael in his quiet, Brazilian-accented English. If that’s the case I’m a rather twisted but stiff individual with a mess of flexibility and adaptability issues. As my right leg screams blue murder and my hip grinds to a jarring halt, solace is visible in the form of the Southern Alps mountain range, a rugged chain of snow-capped peaks ringing the deep, crystal blue waters of Lake Wakatipu. It’s an awesome view, one that continually focuses the mind and softens the pain of recalcitrant limbs and deflated ambitions.

Courtesy of Health and Fitness Travel ([healthandfitnesstravel.com.au](http://healthandfitnesstravel.com.au)) I’m at Aro-Ha, a schmick new wellness retreat 40 minutes’ drive from the New Zealand resort town of Queenstown. The brainchild of hedge-fund manager Chris Madison and lifestyle guru Damian Chaparro, it eschews the pimp and pamper carry-on of traditional lux retreats for a more holistic and matey approach, so that guests can achieve more than just radioactively-glowing skin. For four days and five nights, nutrition, movement, mindfulness and lifestyle are given a gentle kick up the arse in the pursuit of a more aware mode of living. It’s what Damian, a perceptive, 30-something yogi with a congenial mat-side manner, calls “transformation through adventure and fun”.

One of the ideas central to the Aro-Ha ethos is epigenetics – how diet and choices made in life affect the way in which genes express themselves – so subtly shifting people away from bad habits that could trigger illness or disease is one of the retreat’s goals.

I know it didn’t do my genome many favours, but a few years back, I ate 50 pork knuckles in a year for a story. Meat has been

my buddy since I first sunk a milk tooth into a crunchy bacon rind. As our group, an urbane bunch of eight – three men (yes, Aro-Ha is bloke-friendly) and five women – congregate in the Zen-inspired dining area for lunch, I feel a growing sense of despair. After hiking 10km up the Mt Judah track off the nearby town of Glenorchy for spectacular views only goatherds and on-the-run fugitives normally get to see, my stomach is yearning for burnt animal flesh. Instead I confront a vegetable lasagne with quinoa and lentils and a side of pickled vegetable salad. Surprisingly, it’s quite tasty, and despite my misgivings, I’m able to power through the rest of the day, which includes a high-intensity workout and more crippling yoga.

Head chef Rani Gabriel says the paleo-vegan philosophy behind Aro-Ha’s meal plan is to aid the stomach’s digestive processes and help flush out toxins, so that means no meat, which can hang around in the intestines for more than 24 hours, no dairy or gluten and a cap of just 1,200 calories a day. He also advocates a high-fat/low-carb diet – “fat is very important for vitamin A and D absorption” – and despite being a



**Awesome view:** Aro-Ha retreat is shrouded by Lake Wakatipu and the Southern Alps.

**“The paleo-vegan diet is low-carb high-fat, because fat is essential for vitamin A and D absorption.”**

carnivore himself, says combinations such as lentils with quinoa or beans and rice are a rich source of protein. As a regular sufferer of a post-nasal drip, I’m also interested to see if the gluten-free diet has any effect on my runny nose and serial handkerchief abuse.

Each day of the program is divided into yoga, sub-alpine hiking, massage, workouts/Pilates classes and various awareness sessions, with a view to incorporating “mindfulness”, the ability to pull back from a thought and focus on the moment at hand. It’s also meant to help you gain a sense of calm when having an argument and you feel you’re about to lose your rag. I can sense a full-on barney between my triceps and quivering chest as I attempt my 15th TRX pushup. It’s part of a segment retreat leader Adam Chalmers calls his Dynamic Playground. A firm believer in having fun while absorbing bodily punishment, his circuits are based on a Tabata principle: 20 seconds on 10 seconds off for four minutes, utilising combinations such as TRX pushups followed by bodyweight pushups and TRX jump squats followed by bodyweight lunges;



**Spring in his step:** Ash gains maximum elevation on a 10km trek up Mt Judah track.



**Ego-friendly:** Lodges are designed to soothe the soul.



**Mat finish:** Days end with yoga.

plus circuits including medicine balls, kettlebell swings and balance board pushups.

“The most important thing is you’re moving in a way that’s functional to real life and you’re using all your muscles together as a unit,” Adam says. It’s a significant point when the temperature is six degrees and your calves are feeling the burn as you motor along the rugged Routeburn Track: 32km of beech-forested valleys and clear green rivers, topped with ice and snow, and officially one of the 10 most beautiful walks in the world.

On day one and two, the head and body can feel like crap as they adapt to meatless mindfulness. It’s part of a process at Aro-Ha Damian describes as the “J-Curve of happiness”. But helped by daily one-hour massages in the spa area which are so uplifting they feel as though they’ve been delivered by the hands of God, constitutions start to zing and head spaces become less

cluttered with the detritus of modern life.

After 72 hours I’ve overcome my fear of raw-food veganism, and I’m wolfing down smaller portions and using water as a snack. In fact, Damian informs us most inter-meal pigging out is really a yearning for hydration. My regular anxiety dream – nervously tying up the laces on my football boots before a match I end up never making – plagued me during the first two days, but now I’m actually taking the field, although my form is nothing to write home about.

My sinuses, too, are showing signs of improvement but that may be because I’m no longer hoovering up Sydney’s dirty cocktail of industry, car and aeroplane fumes. The air here is not quite as pure as Adam gulped but it’s pretty damn clean.

Nights are spent ogling the stars, or honing meditation and thinking techniques. Damian says (according to Stanford University

## SHAKE UP YOUR MORNING



Kick-start the day with Aro-Ha chef Rani Silva’s protein-rich nitro spirulina shake.

### INGREDIENTS

- 2 cups blueberries
- ½ cup kombucha or cold green tea
- ½ cup coconut meat (white flesh)
- 1 tbsp spirulina
- 2 tbsp raw cacao
- 2 tsp fermented hemp protein
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 1 tbsp amaranth puffs (optional)
- 1 tbsp cacao nibs to top (optional)

### METHOD

1. Add all the ingredients (except the amaranth and cacao nibs) to a blender and blend for a minute or until all smooth.
2. Pour into a glass and top with the amaranth and cacao nibs for texture.

research) a normal human being has about 65,000 thoughts a day (I’m pleasantly surprised my reptilian brain has such a high capacity for thought) and most last for 60-90 seconds, depending on our willingness to feed them. It’s that willingness which determines whether you’re going to dwell on a negative and become miserable or a positive and become happy. A mere shift of sitting or standing position, he says, can change focus, and enable you to connect with your higher self – an invaluable tool when caught in the middle of a slanging match.

The flipside to being able to shift so readily, our meditation expert Penny McGahey says, is that our attention spans, especially in the internet age, are goldfish-short. It’s bleeding obvious when I’m back in my room downloading images from the day’s hike to the northern end of Lake Wakatipu to Facebook while vaguely reading a magazine



**Arms race:** Ash launches a biceps attack TRX-style.

## MAX YOUR TRX

Smash this TRX bodyweight workout courtesy of Aro-Ha's retreat leader Adam Chalmers and ramp up strength and fitness. You'll need about 35 minutes.

- A** Foam roller, 5 mins.  
Back, obliques, glutes, ITB (Iliotibial band), quads, calves
- B** Joint warm-up, 2 mins. Circling neck, shoulders, arms, hips, knees and ankles
- C** Tabata starjumps/jump squats, 4 mins.  
20 secs jumps/squats, 10 secs rest
- D** High-intensity dynamic circuit, 20 mins.  
3 rounds: 45 sec sets, 15 sec rests between sets
  1. Box jumps
  2. TRX rows
  3. TRX pushups
  4. TRX plank knee tucks
  5. Swiss ball plank
  6. Kettlebell swings (two bells)
 1 min rest between rounds.
- E.** 5 mins stretching cool-down: chest, lats, glutes, lower back, hip flexors, hamstrings

article and attempting to text my wife – all at the same time. Continuous partial attention syndrome, a term coined by former Microsoft vice president Linda Stone, sums up our inability to connect with the moment and to direct our distracted thought processes with any real conviction.

Fortunately, sprawled on the massage table, I'm ultra-focused when informed my IT (iliotibial) band, a thick strip of fibrous tissue running from the pelvis to the knee, is so swollen and inflexible it's like concrete, when it should be supple so that it can stabilise the knee during running. Nightly sessions on the foam roller are the remedy, but I'm still limber enough to complete the final day's early-morning 4km hike across an icy track chocka with spiky, angry-looking matagouri bushes.

Waiting to check in at the Queenstown Airport for departure, Damian warned us we may have to call out our anger to quell

**“My IT band is as inflexible as concrete but I'm just limber enough to hike 4km across an icy track.”**

rising frustration at the length of the queue, but five days of meditation and mindfulness have tenderised my perspective somewhat and the snaking wait line doesn't bother me a jot. I've also lost 1.1kg, tamed my carnivorous instincts for five days and earned a functioning set of clear nostrils for the first time in years.

And while it's not practical, or even desirable for me to completely overhaul

my diet, I can cut out bread and pasta and reduce dairy intake. Sure, I still resemble an unsolvable geometry problem on the yoga mat, but there's a genuine sense the activities of the past five days have really tilted my genome towards expressing itself in a more life-friendly fashion. And that's got to be a good thing. ■

## GET TO ARO-HA

**WHERE:** 40 minutes' drive from Queenstown, NZ

**WHEN:** 5-day/4-night retreats are staged throughout the year

**GETTING THERE:** Qantas and Air New Zealand run regular flights to Queenstown

**WEB:** [aro-ha.com](http://aro-ha.com)

**INFO:** For expert fitness travel options go to [healthandfitnesstravel.com.au](http://healthandfitnesstravel.com.au), 1300 551 353

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