

ARO HĀ, GLENORCHY, NEW ZEALAND

## LAUGHTER THERAPY

A WELLNESS RETREAT? YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS

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“**W**hen was the last time you saw a serious tree? Or a serious bird?” asks retreat co-leader Chris, as he encourages our group to shed shoes and socks for a bout of barefoot forest bathing, despite the overnight snowfalls on the Humboldt Mountains surrounding us in Glenorchy. “Nature is playful. Nature is light. Nature knows how to laugh.”

Right now, halfway into a retreat that involves, among other things, morning hikes of up to 14km and today, the one-two punch of Sacred Silence (not talking) and a Fluid Feast (not eating), I’m not sure I do.

But a mere 10 minutes later the universe sets me a test. I am attempting to cross a stream, awkwardly holding hiking shoes and socks, when I lose my balance on a wet rock and plunge backwards into the freezing water. I am motionless for a few seconds as I consider what truly matters: who saw me? Am I injured? And what would stand-up comedian Mr Tree do in such a situation?

My bottom lip starts to quiver as I scramble up a dirt track leading away from the river to put as much distance as I can between myself

and the next approaching hiker. But with each step I start to see that this inelegant tussle with Mother Nature is an opportunity: I can start blubbering or I can park the self-pity and just keep walking. After all, calling for help, laughing aloud at my clumsiness with new friends or heading home to comfort eat are non-options at this point.

And ultimately, it’s laughter and lightness – our deep need for it, the therapeutic nature of it, and the unexpected places it can be found – that is my biggest takeaway from the six glorious days I spend at Aro Hā, just up the road but a philosophical world away from the New Zealand South Island adventure hotspot of Queenstown.

It would be very easy to fixate on the things you are asked to surrender at a place such as this, a holistic wellness retreat that offers a finely calibrated approach to those seeking a physical, spiritual and emotional overhaul. Or even those just seeking something. And in the weeks leading up to my arrival, focus is squarely on a slow and steady approach to preparation: getting off caffeine, shunning sugar, cutting down on alcohol and incorporating some heart-starting hills into a regular walking routine.





The wise Aro Hā crew prefer you to be largely done with the detoxing by the time you land. Reason being that when the Tibetan chimes signalling an imminent vinyasa yoga class sound outside your door in the predawn darkness, or you find yourself lying in an icy tributary with a sodden Camelbak still attached and your socks floating downstream, you can maintain a modicum of composure.

But there's also something so truly generous about the Aro Hā experience that any sense of deprivation never eventuates. Quite possibly because you're so busy laughing. Oh, and eating head chef Marika Vani's incredible

vegan food. And being massaged (daily, by a team of wise, intuitive, gifted therapists). And stretched (physically via yoga and mentally via daily gratitude journaling and having to befriend a group of strangers that includes, in this instance, a baby-faced US digital entrepreneur, an NZ winemaker and artist, an integrative doctor, a software visionary, a graphic designer, construction-company director and a gardener). And being seen (there's nowhere to hide halfway up a mountain) and heard (no phones at this dining table).

There's most definitely loss – many centimetres and a few kilograms. But the scales are an

afterthought in an environment when there's also the chance to declutter your outlook and shed the much weightier albatross of taking it all just a bit too seriously.

**My first true belly laugh comes** after our initial hike – a fierce climb up the Invincible Mine track, where retreat co-leader Adam lets the group of 16 natter on the way up but suggests silence and solitude for the return journey. Spirits are high but legs are shaky, so those not yet pulled aside for their daily massage meet in the outdoor hot tub at the retreat's Obsidian Spa where Adam, a heavily bearded wellness wunderkind, is schooling us in the bracing art of contrast hydrotherapy – popularised by Dutch extreme athlete Wim Hof, also known as The Iceman.

From the hot tub, our group descends gingerly into the ice pool, where we hold hands/scream obscenities for three breaths, ultimately submerging our heads before a frenzied group dash to the Finnish sauna. Adam dramatically twirls his towel, ringmaster-style, above the coals to gather heat before flicking us with its contents. Maybe we're delirious, but the combo of his commitment to showmanship and the shock of the extreme contrast in temperature – a cycle we repeat three times – has us in sweaty stitches. Waking the next day with no muscle soreness is a happy bonus.

By day three, and with the end of our voluntary 24-hour break from eating and talking tantalisingly close, the group hits its joyous stride. We sit in collegiate silence in the clean-lined beauty of the guest lounge, all smooth timbers, Central Otago schist and Bemboka throw rugs; the vibe and the views of Lake Wakatipu more than making up for



**Zen:** In the yoga room; vegan dish; view from the eco-suite. Previous page: rest break on a hike; Aro Ha inside and out

the lack of conversation (or wi-fi). We swallow giggles when several of us fall asleep and begin to ugly-snore during a Tibetan singing bowl and sound-healing session. We grin wildly while impersonating animals during Adam's Peace Sticks class, clumsily juggling carved pieces of timber in a humorous game of trust.

It's all about the laughter by the time we gather in the evening darkness of the yoga room with Aro Hā's founder Damian Chaparro to dance/sway/nerd shuffle in an invigorating but emotionally challenging (for most) session of not-caring-what-people-think. And try desperately to "fly" each other during the physical manifestation of lightness that is acro-yoga, our final activity of the retreat.

Before departure, Adam counsels the outgoing guests about the challenges of re-entry; how to somehow keep on living your best life when no one is there to pull most of the hardest strings on your behalf. There are chuckles when he suggests walking in the door of your house backwards for a fresh perspective on a familiar situation.

But it's an astute observation. What's the point of all those hills, weeks off caffeine and dancing in a blindfold in front of semi-strangers if it doesn't prompt a shift of sorts?

And so, when I sit down at my local library to write this story and a fierce Sydney storm triggers a fire alarm that forces us out into wild winds, lightning and driving rain, I'm unfazed. When the frazzled librarians insist we meet at the evacuation point in the middle of an oval, I do Adam, Aro Hā and myself proud. I start to laugh.

◀ [aro-ha.com](http://aro-ha.com) ▶

## CHECKLIST

- ◀ **Best for:** Fans of early starts, steep climbs, silence and cold water. Oh, and just about anyone really.
- ◀ **Getting there:** Aro Ha is near Glenorchy, about 40 minutes from Queenstown, South Island, New Zealand. Return airport transfers are provided.
- ◀ **Must do:** Embrace every aspect of the experience. And laugh.
- ◀ **Rates:** The signature six-day, five-night Revive and Thrive retreats start from \$6345, all inclusive.

