



THE MIND HAS TO travel

After years of working hard and playing harder, Charlotte Hunter lost sight of who she really was. A solo retreat allowed her to bring herself back into focus...

It's day two of my retreat in Italy and I'm face-to-face with a shaman. 'Why are you here?' he says. Silence. 'Who is Charlotte?' Silence again. 'What does Charlotte want?' He's smiling but I feel cornered. He's throwing questions at me and I can't find the words to answer. I've never met a shaman before and I'm... well, I'm scared.

Before this moment the Vair Spa in Puglia, Italy, was resembling something like heaven. Borgo Egnazia, the hotel that it's part of, is a walled hamlet of tiny houses, courtyards and gardens overlooking the Adriatic sea. Its aesthetic is based on traditional rustic villages from this

part of the country and, as the sun sets on the powdery sandstone buildings, it's magical. Indeed, once you pass through the ancient-looking entrance gates, it's like you've entered a whole new world, which is exactly what I needed. I just wasn't prepared for the shaman.

Whenever I've been through challenging times, I've turned to travel. It's become a sort of therapy. 'At its deepest level, travel can assist us with our psychological education,' writes philosopher Alain de Botton in *The New Art Of Travel* (Penguin) I can relate to this. De Botton talks about using travel to take an inner journey. 'It can - when

approached the right way - play a critical role in helping us to grow into better versions of our normal selves. When it corrects the imbalances and immaturities of our natures, travel reveals its full potential to function as a form of therapy.'

I needed to do something about the hectic nature of my lifestyle - taking cocaine had become a habit and it was making me strung out. I wrote a note in my journal a year ago: 'It all boils down to how we feel about ourselves. Our relationship with loneliness.' It sounds a bit bleak, but looking back, I'd say it's spot on. I'm not good at quieting my mind when I'm alone. I flutter around, flapping my wings, but can't quite come into land.

I'd been feeling lost for a while and going out a lot. Or sometimes not going out but still getting lost, in my home, alone. I enjoyed getting out of my mind. I've taken drugs recreationally since my late teens, part of the post-acid-house generation; I'm 38 now and still get high sometimes, mainly on coke. There are a lot of people like me: we grew up with it, it's part of our culture - it's how we bonded with friends, or at least how we identified with them. We have adventures and scrapes to reminisce about. Hedonism is intoxicating in so many ways: it's addictive. And that's the problem.

The thing is, I just don't want to do it any more. Correction: I don't want to do it as much. For most of my thirties (until very recently), I've been single - partying, adventuring - and as a journalist, the 'work hard, play hard' approach to life is something I've taken very literally. I've had a blast, but I think I knew I was starting to lean on drugs at the wrong times - and a little too often - in a bid to quieten that 'noisy' mind of mine. I think despite my busy life, I was trying to fill a lonely space in my heart. Or perhaps numb it.

Below: Borgo Egnazia has sweeping views over the Adriatic Sea



Right: The piazza, Puglia. Below right: A bedroom at Borgo Egnazia



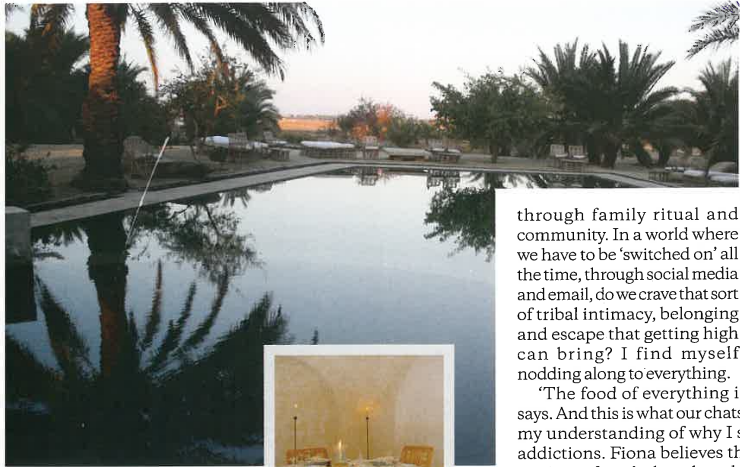
I'm not good at quieting my mind. I flutter around, flapping my wings, but I can't quite come into land'



This is not a cautionary tale; at least, I don't think it is. I wouldn't say I have a drug problem (a therapist did tell me I'm in denial - classic), but I had started to realise something needed to change. Which brings me back to that note: it all boils down to how we feel about ourselves. And how do we find that out? We go away, by ourselves, for some headspace. There, that's the first step.

There have been various points in my life when travelling has been my saviour. Once, during a verging-on-abusive relationship in my twenties, I had the chance to go to Rajasthan on a yoga retreat. It was revelatory in its healing powers; the effect of that awe-inspiring country and time spent alone thrown into a new circumstance. I felt like the 18th-century writer and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft, feeling the effect of 'sublime nature' on an unhappy traveller. India can make anyone and their problems seem small, because the giant heart of the place swallows you up. Everything feels like a sign: from the cows wandering the crazy streets, to the unrelenting warmth of the people in the face of extreme poverty, and the miracle of getting within 10 metres of an actual tiger. It's just so much that you can't help but ask yourself some questions.

To put myself back together at the end of that relationship, I drove 10 hours from Cairo, deep into the Sahara, to the remote eco lodge Adrère Amellal. There was no electricity, only private rooms and magical desert views. Where better to heal than in this ancient land surrounded by sand dunes? If it sounds indulgent, maybe it was. But you should indulge yourself back from the brink.



Above and right:
The pool and
dining area at
Adrère Amellat



'Being cared for, mothered almost, when you're used to doing everything yourself, is really quite a profound feeling, and therapeutic in itself'

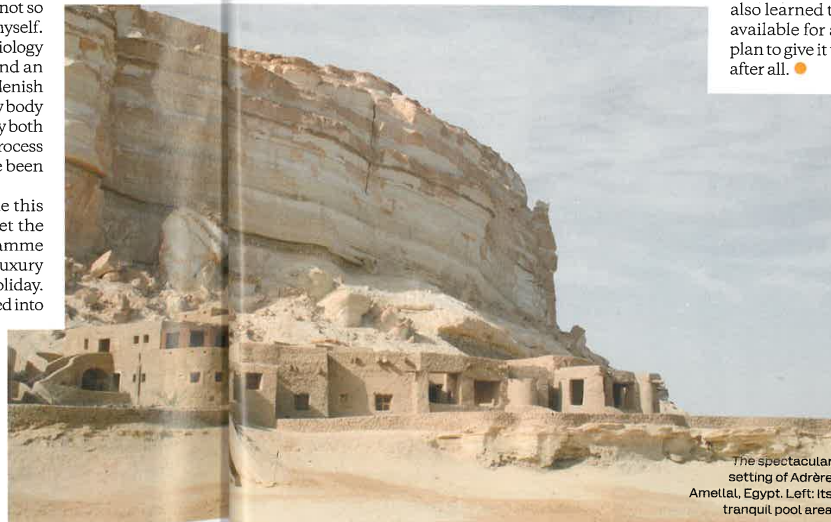
through family ritual and community. In a world where we have to be 'switched on' all the time, through social media and email, do we crave that sort of tribal intimacy, belonging and escape that getting high can bring? I find myself nodding along to everything.

'The food of everything is knowledge,' she says. And this is what our chats are about: feeding my understanding of why I succumb to social addictions. Fiona believes that many of us are victims of a whole cultural behaviour. We're pleasure seekers, but we need balance - something I'm definitely lacking.

The aim here is to bring that balance to my life, starting in this rural idyll without a phone, TV or wifi, but with the nourishment of time, silence and healthy food. Each morning after breakfast, I sit on the garden wall to look out over the patchwork fields. The healing power of a beautiful view is not to be underestimated. I'm a bit tearful on day one, but by day three I'd say that feeling is turning to something akin to inspiration and optimism.

Fiona wants me to slow down and be more settled in myself, 'to come into land'. I'm good at the outgoing part of my life - the yang - but not so good at the yin, which is about nurturing myself. To this end, I have daily acupuncture, kinesiology sessions, transformational breath work, and an amazing massage. The therapies should replenish the energy I've lost through not caring for my body and mind. The acupuncture and kinesiology both identify where I'm depleted and begin the process of repair. I'm fascinated learning what I've been doing to my body: I was close to burnout.

A month later, determined to continue this journey, I go to the Vair Spa, where I meet the shaman. And, whereas The Arrigo Programme was a residential therapy retreat, Vair is a luxury spa in a five-star hotel. It feels more like a holiday. The quiet luxury and local tradition embedded into



The spectacular setting of Adrère Amellat, Egypt. Left: its tranquil pool area

Right and far right: The Arrigo Programme's idyllic Somerset retreat



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every aspect of Borgo Egnazia have a deeply healing effect. It's impossible not to feel uplifted by the beauty and attention to detail, from the olive oil produced on-site to the age-old spa rituals.

My first meeting is with Vair's spa director, Patrizia Bortolin. I'm invited to smell different aromatherapy oils, and the ones I'm drawn to reveal key character traits. I'm sceptical, but interested to see where it leads. Patrizia is such a calming influence that I feel safe in her hands.

The next morning, I begin with the Spirit treatment, where I'm scrubbed with local sea salt rubbed with fresh lemons and rinsed with lavender water. I'm guided through each stage, entering different pools between treatments, by a wonderful therapist. This is the first phase of my programme: 'cocooning'. The other two are 'revolution' and 'new', with therapies aligned to each.

I emerge from the spa and walk around the grounds looking out to sea. Then, as I'm in Italy, I indulge in a steaming bowl of pasta with fried oysters. And a glass of white wine that has never tasted so delicious (I've been off booze throughout this whole experience, so it's particularly good).

But the real work starts back at home. Fiona

and Patrizia get in touch with me to reflect on what I've done, which keeps me focused. 'In three days we tried to bring to the surface emotional toxins that are stuck in the body,' Patrizia says over email. 'There's no shortcut, it's healing work to be done with knowledge learned in the spa.'

Back in London, I build new elements into my life aimed at being more mindful and keeping my energy levels in check. I treat myself to an annual pass at Triyoga (suitably indulgent as it is the A-list of yoga studios). Often when I'm tempted to make that late-night call, it's when I'm already on a high - wired after work - so the key is to slow down. On a practical level, I do this by taking baths with Epsom salts, and drinking herbal teas rather than wine (alcohol is a trigger for me).

Fiona told me if I'm weakening, to lie on my bed with my eyes closed, to reflect on the day and do some of the breathing techniques. At first I thought, 'Oh yeah, what will that do?' But it really has helped - I'm looking after myself so much better. I'm 'minding the gap' (keeping an eye on myself and remembering to find balance) as Fiona put it. I've also learned to say no. I can't always be the one available for a mad night out. Although I don't plan to give it up altogether. It's all about balance, after all. ●



Healing Holidays (020 7843 3597; healingholidays.co.uk), arrange stays at Vair Spa, Borgo Enazia, from £595pp, including three nights B&B, return flights from the UK, transfers, and access to spa and fitness facilities. 'Spirit' ritual treatments start from £55.

The Arrigo Programme
Personal consultations with Fiona Arrigo (01963 350460; arrigoprogramme.com) start from £130 for 60 minutes. See website for further details, along with retreat information.

Adrère Amellat, Siwa, Egypt; 202 2736 7879; i-escape.com/adrere-amellat. Doubles around £390, inc full board and excursions.