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OM TREND - YOGA EMBRACES THE GOOD LIFE

YOGA is the fastest growing fitness activity in Australia, according to recent stats from Roy Morgan Research. What's changed is that it's no longer practiced primarily by women. One in 10 Millennial males aged 25 to 34 do yoga regularly or occasionally, reports the researcher. For stressed-out people of both sexes, just a few days of quiet reflection and body-stretching poses at a yoga retreat resets your mood and the vegetarian/organic diets act as a springboard to lifestyle changes. There's no need to go cold turkey on your favourite tittle, either, as the workout and wine holiday trend has gained global traction.

Not surprisingly, yoga and wine retreats have been popular in California's Napa Valley for some time. But anyone torn between a wellness and foodie vacation need struggle with their conscience no longer at Castello di Potentino in Tuscany. The setting is unbeatable - a medieval castle in the region's Conca d'Oro (Golden Basin), set amid textbook vineyards and olive groves. Apart from polishing your downward dog and lotus positions, you'll head home with something unique. An official Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET) Level 1 wine certification.

The retreat opened last year and is the brainchild of Emily O'Hare, the former head sommelier at London's Michelin-starred River Cafe. Daily wine tastings and workshops are held between yoga sessions near the castle's outdoor pool. Time to spare? Why not take part in one of the pasta-making classes. Every course at

lunch or dinner is, of course, matched with local wines. Restoring inner balance has never been more enjoyable.

Or why not trace your ancestry, drive the whisky trail and then relax and detox in the Scottish Highlands at the EcoYoga Scotland Centre at Inverliever Lodge, only a two-and-a-half hour drive from Glasgow. Yes, a river runs through this rustic getaway where you can bathe in hot and

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cold running spring winter in a geodesic dome or a rugged gorge. The beds are made by local craftsmen, the mattresses are deep and there's underfloor heating. A year-long calendar of yoga retreats caters for all levels of ability. Ashtanga experts Nick Loening and John Evans, who is also a master of the Alexander Technique which realigns the body after a lifetime of stress, will clean out any cobwebs. Healthy veggie food and old-fashioned Scottish porridge make a welcome change from the ubiquitous muesli.

Centro Santillan on Spain's Costa del Sol is one of Europe's finest yoga and well-

being centres, and a stay here is like living in a movie fantasy. An historic Andalusian farmhouse anchors the 50,000sq/m spread overlooking the Mediterranean. The two yoga studios are state-of-the-art and the Carlo Enzo sala with floor-to-ceiling windows boasting sea views offers surreal yoga and meditation sessions at sunrise and sunset. The cuisine rests on the paddock-to-plate principle and the eggs are laid by the property's free-range chickens. Massages, hiking trails, golf and trips to the nearby buzzing town of Malaga fill "off-duty" hours. The best wine bar in the town is Antigua Casa de Guardia, where the interior is filled with old wine barrels and regional wines are the speciality.

India, the birthplace of yoga, is packed with retreats - luxury and basic. Yogamagic Eco Retreat in Goa is a stress-relieving bolthole that delivers both from eco-chic tent lodges to the Maharajah's Suite in the main house. Sustainability is top-of-mind from solar heating to the use of local building materials and it's hatha all the way from Vinyasa Flow to Kundalini. Adopting the warrior position isn't compulsory but a customised program is recommended. Only 2km from Anjuna, hop in a taxi to relax in beach bars like the tented Guru Bar, Dali Bar which offers a decent wine list or the Shore Bar with great beach views.

The world-famous Miraval Resort near Tucson in Arizona sets the gold standard for global wellness. In addition to classic yoga, there's a roll-call of variations from

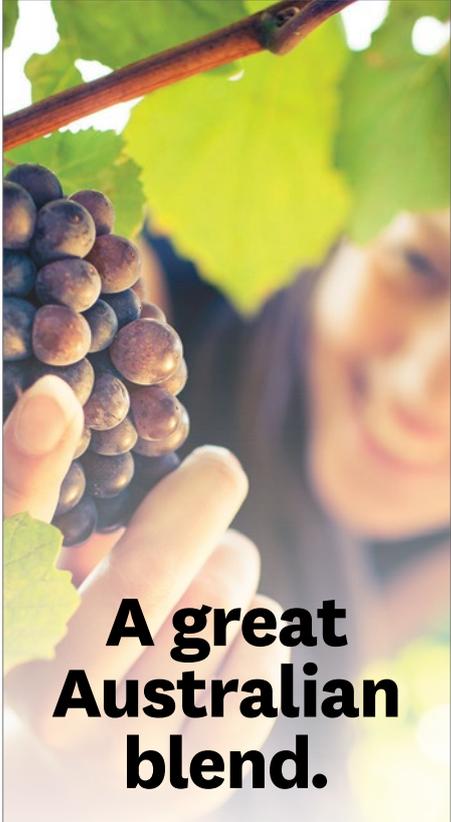
aerial yoga through core yoga, desert waves yoga and dream yoga. Everything is five-star but the activity programs of all sorts from horse whispering to desert tightrope walking make other retreats look as if they have taken their eye off the well-being ball. There's not even a hint of going without from touring the kitchen and toasting the chef with expertly-made cocktails, chatting with local providore, Richard Starkey, or enjoying a biodynamic wine-tasting session.

Paul and Tory von Bergen run the Billabong Retreat only 45 minutes by car from the Sydney CBD, near Richmond. For winelovers, it's comforting to note that the nearest train station is called Vineyard. Deluxe clifftop cabins and treehouses are set amid textbook bushland. The food is superstar vegetarian and light years away from being hair shirt. Come for a day or seven for deeper yoga, mindful intelligence and stress management programs. It's worth making a pilgrimage to the Macquarie Arms Hotel in nearby Windsor, at 202 years old it's the oldest pub in Australia. Open fires in winter and an atmospheric beer garden in summer ramp up the historic pleasure.

Apart from its beaches and laidback lifestyle, Byron Bay has built up a rep as a go-to destination for craft beer lovers. The Byron Bay Brewing Co serves up six of its beers on tap and you can watch the brewing process in action. For those keen to try experimental brews and limited releases from Stone & Wood, the popular

craft beer brand's Byron Bay Brewery is open seven days a week but booking ahead is a must. Byron is also the heartland of yoga retreats in Australia. Noted teacher and author Jessie Chapman has been challenging people according to their yoga skills - novice to experienced - for over 16 years at her popular Radiance Retreat. She also organises an annual calendar of international yoga retreats in Bali, Thailand, France, Spain, Italy and New Zealand if you want to go further afield.

Australian travellers have returned to Hawaii in droves. Lumeria, far from the madding Oahu crowd, will help you build mental and physical strength on your return home. Located in an historic homestead on Maui's north shore, daily yoga classes at sunset on the lawn in the shadow of Haleakala Volcano forms the core of an edited list of activities designed to burn off tension and energy - ziplining, surfing, kayaking, hiking and whale-watching. Revitalising spa treatments using crystals help you to relax with an organic fruit juice on your own personal lanai in this luxury bolthole. An expertly curated wine list and cocktails for lunch and dinner seal the deal.



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