

# COLLECTIVE HUB

GAME CHANGERS  
THOUGHT LEADERS  
RULE BREAKERS  
STYLE MAKERS

THE AUSSIE REBELS

leaders  
AND VISIONARIES  
TAKING ON

NYC

LIFE INSIDE A  
FAMILY  
EMPIRE

HOW TO:  
LAUNCH  
A PATENTED  
PRODUCT

ISSUE 38  
VIRTUAL  
REALITY

HOW IT WILL IMPACT YOU

blake  
lively

*the balancing act*

PHILOSOPHER  
ALAIN DEBOTT  
"WISDOM IS  
ABOUT WISE  
LIVING AS  
OPPOSED  
TO JUST  
LIVING"

# LIFE

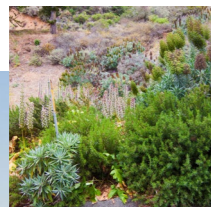
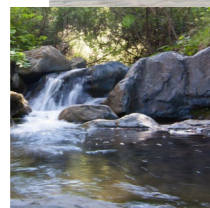
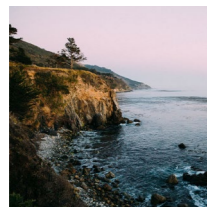
STORIES TO INSPIRE



PHOTOGRAPHY: SERENA RENNER

# THE LONG WAY HOME

Writer *Serena Renner* spends a week in RETREAT at California's renowned *Esalen Institute* in search of FREEDOM and HEALING.



**I** imagine my body as a tree, spindly roots sprouting from my tailbone, my arms outstretched like branches. Water cycles from my stomach to the leaves of my fingertips, passing through my heart, which looks like an empty measuring cup tilted in such a way that any water flowing in pours straight out like in M.C. Escher's "Waterfall".

When I open my eyes, I'm back at the Esalen Institute, the famous alternative education hub that teeters on the edge of California's stunning Big Sur coastline. It was founded in 1962 by Stanford alums Michael Murphy and Dick Price to pioneer the "human potential" movement. The cast of the Esalen story includes everyone from US astronomer Carl Sagan and psychologist Timothy Leary to the fictional Don Draper – there have been rumours that Esalen was where Draper escapes to seaside bliss in the finale of *Mad Men*. While the mission, which Esalen president Gordon Wheeler says is to "change the culture in the direction of humanism, creativity, sustainability and social justice" hasn't wavered, guests now

more often come from the Google bus than the 'magic bus'.

It's day four of my yoga and creativity workshop when I'm translating the hollow-hearted tree-woman to Seema. "You need to water your heart," she says. "You also need to grow since your root has been compromised." I would normally judge such out-there advice, but, in this case, I can't help but agree.

The next phase of my 'spiritual massage' plays out. "Now imagine your parents seated beside you, your mother on your left, your father on your right. Just see them as they are, without judgment." My body trembles when I picture my father so close, and I can feel a tear break against my lavender eye pillow. "Around your head are your allies, the people who always support you. Now imagine a white Buddha above them, glowing in light. His eyes are open, staring deep into yours, sending light beams of love – more than any mother or father." I picture

the white light lasering out from the Buddha's forehead into my toes. It rises up through my body until I'm suspended in a flaming white hammock.

Later in the session, I have a surprising vision: I'm sitting on a rocky ledge, staring into what looks like an empty Grand Canyon. I reluctantly jump in, but instead of dying, the white Buddha light comes back, erupting from the canyon base and shooting me out as if I'm riding some divine geyser.

At the conclusion of the massage, I'm a bit shaken up. I normally barely remember dreams, let alone have visions. "You're very receptive to energy work," Seema tells me, before suggesting I do another Buddhist meditation on my own, in which I say, 'I'm sorry', 'Thank you' and 'I love you' to anyone who has hurt me.

Outside, I'm reoriented by the sight of the Esalen bathhouse, a two-level stone and wood structure burrowed into the side of a cliff. I can see men and women saluting the afternoon sun, nude, on the top deck; their pink bodies stand out against the dry land. By my fourth day at Esalen I'm accustomed to nudity, but the scene is still enough to distract me from a striped garter snake that darts across my path. It feels like an omen.

Before Esalen became one of the West's cores of counterculture, it was a mineral spring, first used thousands of years ago by the Esselen Native Americans. The hot springs have been a centrepiece of the Esalen experience from day one, luring guests to the

meditative coastline to shed their worries, along with their clothing, between sessions on yoga, spoken word, Eastern religion, leadership and psychology.

I discovered Esalen eight years ago when attending a 'public bathing session', which occurs at 1.00 in the morning. After driving through furious fog, I was escorted down this very path with a hushed mix of Americans and international guests, who later discussed Carl Jung's archetype theory and

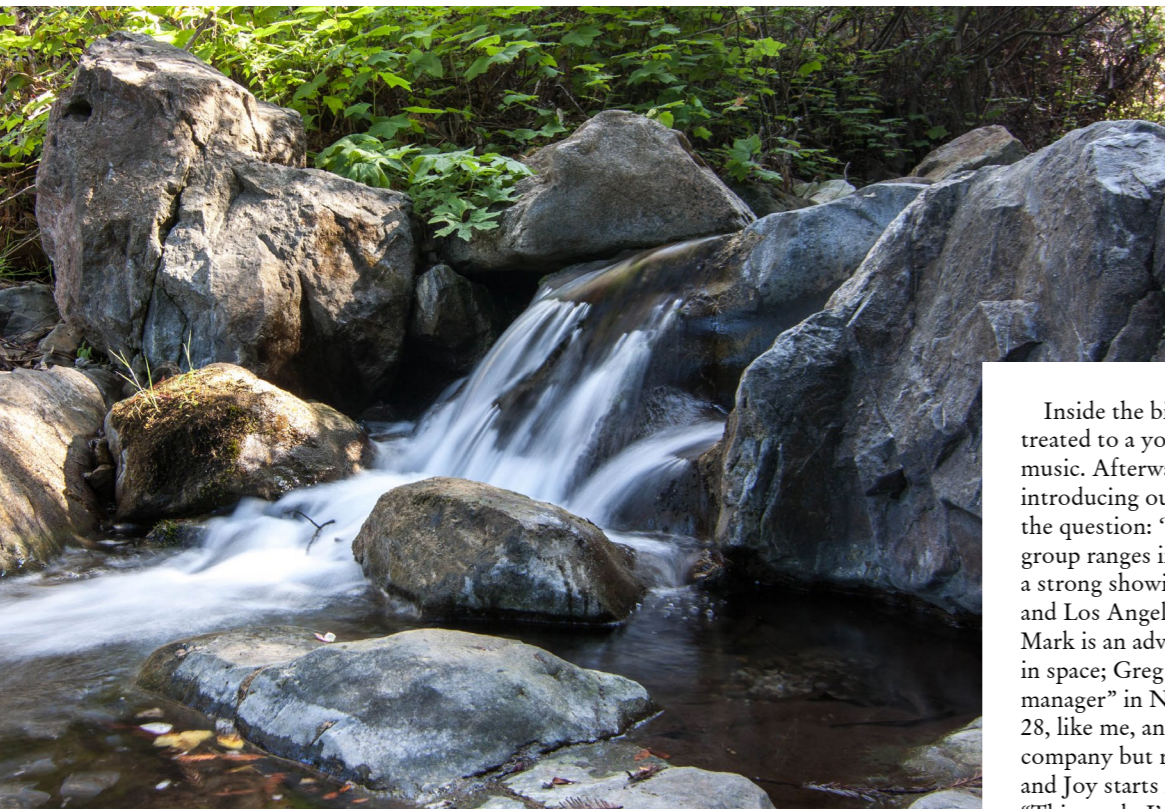
'ecstatic dance' under the full moon.

I've returned to the legendary bathhouse a few times since, always finding freedom and adventure in the late-night ritual. But I had never taken one of Esalen's

renowned workshops. I heard the institute recently launched a Campus Renewal Project to upgrade facilities and adapt to a new culture in which edginess was now mainstream. It seemed like a good time to visit and see what the place looked like in broad daylight. >

**IMAGINE** *a white BUDDHA... glowing in light. His EYES are OPEN, staring deep into yours, sending light beams of LOVE.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: SERENA RENNER // COURTESY OF ESALEN



Inside the big tent, my group is treated to a yoga flow session set to live music. Afterwards, we go around a circle introducing ourselves and answering the question: 'What is your art?' The group ranges in age from 28 to 70, with a strong showing from San Francisco and Los Angeles. Jobs run the gamut: Mark is an advertising writer interested in space; Greg is a "transcendence manager" in New York; Samantha is 28, like me, and runs a produce delivery company but really wants to paint; and Joy starts her introduction with, "This week, I'm not Mum." When it's my turn, I say my art is journalism and photography but also "living freely and fearlessly." The words surprise me as they spill out of my mouth.

At lunch I sit with Mark in the old wood-paneled lodge for udon mushroom soup and gluten-free cake topped with chocolate frosting (Esalen is also a leader in organic farming and healthy meals are chronicled in their own cookbook). Mark says he's been to 10 workshops over 20 years. The biggest change he's witnessed? "People going like this," he says while making texting motions with his thumb. He adds that there wasn't much yoga 20 years ago but now, "The New Age has come to the modern age."

A few weeks after my retreat, I follow up with Esalen president Gordon Wheeler, a clinical psychologist, who puts my experience in even better context. "The first thing Esalen pioneered was the idea that you need to continue knowing yourself better, deepening your personal self-awareness and your capacity to make choices, listen and express yourself," he says. "All that, which is so familiar to us as a life curriculum now, didn't exist [in the 1960s]. You followed a guru, and if you didn't follow a guru, you had psychotherapy because there was something wrong with you. But the idea that your life was a personal quest and

*One of the AMAZING things about Esalen is the flow of the COMMUNITY, both the workers and the guests who come from all over the WORLD.*

But there was another reason I was drawn to Esalen at this time. I too was going through a transition. I had moved from California to

Australia two years prior, which caused a dramatic rift in my family. The fallout was championed by my controlling father, who strongly opposed the move as well as my recent marriage. Despite pleas for forgiveness and lengthy attempts to explain my motivations, we were stuck at a stalemate, and I was left paralysed by sadness and guilt. The strain was starting to interfere with my writing and my ability to actually enjoy the grand adventure I was supposed to be living. It was time to deal with my emotions, and I thought this might help.

"One of the amazing things about Esalen is the flow of the community, both the workers and the guests who come from all over the world," says Brad, a mindfulness teacher who I meet outside the Leonard Pavilion on my first morning. "People come to heal themselves. That's what it is for a lot of people."



that you needed to find fulfilment was not on the table. Esalen helped put it there."

Even this place of enlightenment has its challenges though, Gordon admits, from the property's remote location along a vacant stretch of Highway 1 to the fact that the non-profit has to house and feed nearly all its staff.

In addition to the Campus Renewal Project, Esalen has introduced new series and seminars that reportedly bring entrepreneurs and Fortune 500 leaders together with ecologists, biologists and political analysts to talk about the pertinent issues of the day.

"The 53-year conversation [since Esalen's launch] is still going," says Gordon. "The conversation is about what's not being talked about in the culture that needs to be talked about."

Whatever the conversation is that's on the edge, in the shadows, that's where we want to be."

I recall how, during my last few days at the retreat, between waking up to whale song and watching

*The conversation is ABOUT what's not being TALKED about in the CULTURE that NEEDS to be talked about.*

shooting stars at the bathhouse, I'm forced to confront my emotional edge and the thoughts and feelings that lurk in my own shadow, most of them involving my father. As our group meditates in a gazebo by the river, I picture myself as a young girl of about eight sitting on the bow of my dad's boat in a one-piece swimsuit, pretending to be Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*. Another day, during yoga, we're swaying our bodies like seaweed looking out at the ocean, and thoughts of my dad – the fisherman – flood back. This time, he's searching for kelp paddies on the high seas, screaming, "Boil!" in excitement any time a fish jumps out of the water.

Then the band plays "Mercy Street" by Peter Gabriel, and I am crippled by the chorus, "Dreaming of Mercy Street/ Wear your insides out/ Dreaming of mercy in your daddy's arms again", remembering the harsh words and screamed accusations that make mercy seem so far out of reach.

"I'm going to leave unless we can talk about this," I protested the last time I saw my father. "You're always leaving," he yelled, shortly before I walked out the door one final time.

There are moments of clarity when I not only recognise the pain inflicted but also the pain I have caused, moving across the world from the people I'm supposed to care about most. I also get flashes of inspiration about the kind of life I want to live, the stories I want to write and the beauty of the journey – my personal quest towards fulfilment – no matter how messy it has been.

On our last day, my group gets in another circle to share a work of art made during the week. I read a poem about a piece of kelp that breaks free from a violent shore and is now floating in search of a new home.

I wrote the poem earlier that morning while at a viewpoint behind the Leonard Pavilion. After reading it aloud to the group, I am taken back to the moment when I reach the lookout, overcome by emotion. There's a bench with a mosaic of a snake wrapped around it, and below, a statue of a Buddha. Sobbing, I kneel down by the Buddha and say, "I'm sorry." "Thank you." "I love you." Turning around to face the ocean, I see a little white sign attached to the fence. The words "I love you" are written in red lettering, like an answer sent back to me from across the sea. ■

