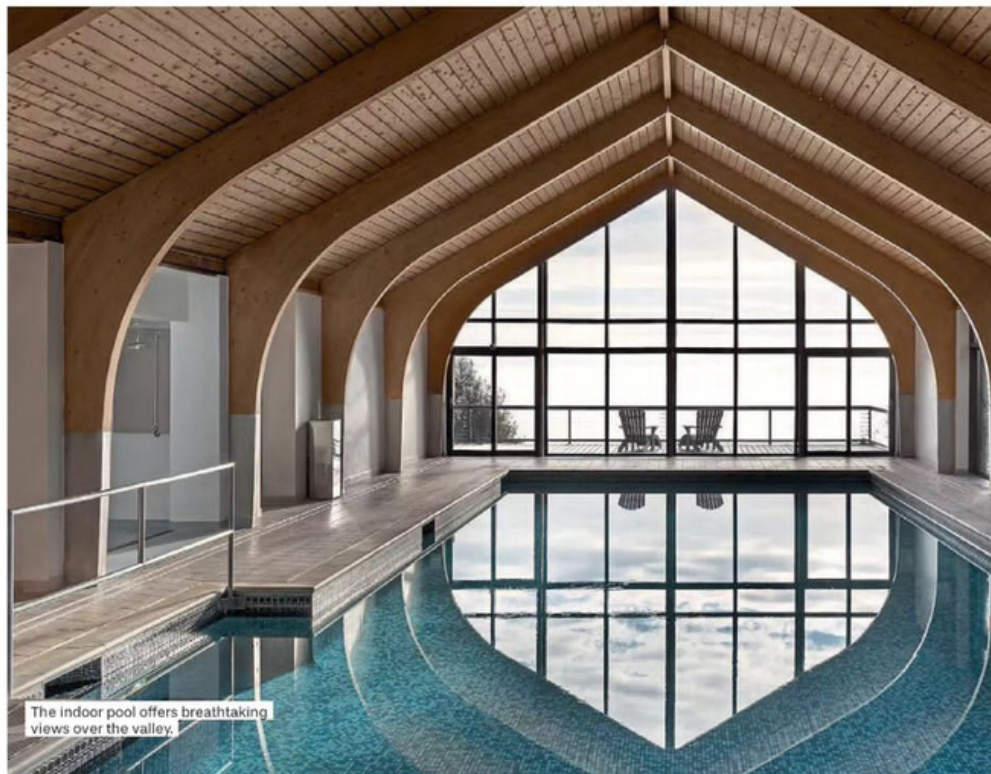




Your New Year health reset

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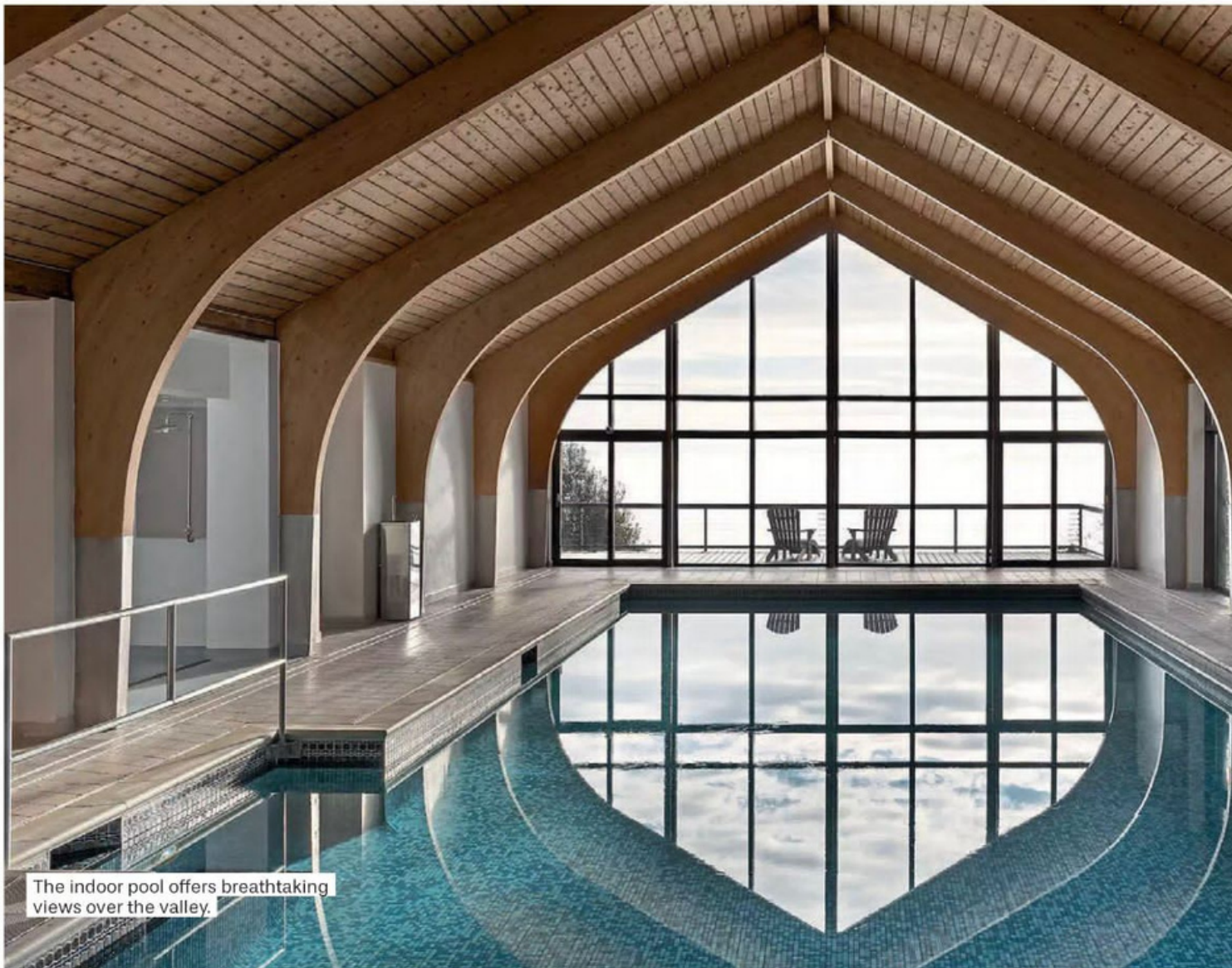


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Combe Grove's imposing Georgian manor house is Grade-II listed.



Words: Alice Boscovici. Images: Combe Grove.

For most of my adult life I've struggled with weight, and I also found out in my early 40s that I have type-1 diabetes, which doesn't help matters. As such, I've tried numerous diets and been to various health retreats, and while I come back feeling physically lighter, mentally rebalanced and brimming with good intentions, the problem is that, once home, all those good intentions fly out of the window.

So, when I come across a retreat in Somerset that promises to support you for an entire year afterwards, I book in immediately.

The founders of Combe Grove Metabolic Health Retreat, just outside Bath, understand that it's not what you achieve in a week that will make a difference to your life, but what you consistently practice over time. They also believe that most health conditions are rooted in metabolic dysfunction, so their aim is to bring you back into a state of homeostasis, i.e. biological balance. Another big draw is that the programme is run by PhD dietitians and a GP who all specialise in metabolic health.

The estate of Combe Grove is set in an area of outstanding natural beauty, just 10 minutes away from the spa town of Bath, surrounded by 70 acres of lush countryside and woodland. Walking into the stunning Grade II-listed Georgian manor house feels like walking into the pages of a Jane Austen novel, with breathtaking views of rolling hills and wild meadows.

My room for the week is in the Barn Terrace, just a short walk from the main house. It has a calming, nature-inspired theme, with chalky walls, wooden accents and splashes of sage and bottle green. The bed is comfortable and king-sized, with luxurious Woolroom linen.

Based on my pre-consultation, I'd been recommended to use rosemary as my room scent to promote calm and balance. As such, I have a room diffuser with a bottle of rosemary essential oil, a rosemary-infused body oil, and a bag of fresh-dried rosemary.

The bathroom is beautifully appointed with natural amenities from Bramley, and there's also a freestanding Japanese bathtub in the corner of the bedroom, complete with a fresh seaweed infusion bag and salt body scrub, which I use most nights.

COMPREHENSIVE HEALTH CHECKS

I've opted for the signature Combe Grove Metabolic Health Retreat, and my experience with the team begins three weeks before I arrive in person, when I fill in comprehensive health questionnaires, do an at-home blood test with a company called Thiva, and have a telephone consultation with one of Combe Grove's nutritionists.

Upon arrival, I am warmly welcomed and introduced to the whole team along with other retreat participants. Nutritionist Oliver Pratt explains the five main roots of mindset, movement, nutrition, sleep and environment. He talks us through the daily timetable and it's soon clear this is not going to be like other weight-loss retreats I've attended; this is about having time to rest, reflect, restore and reset your metabolism with expert guidance.

On day one I have a consultation with the brilliant Dr Campbell Murdoch

who compares my weight, height and waist measurements to ascertain my level of insulin resistance, which appears normal. A finger prick test checks my glucose reading, which as expected is on the high side. He also analyses my blood triglycerides and HDL cholesterol and the all-important ratio between them, which thankfully comes back as ideal. My blood pressure is also good.

The Thruva blood tests I had taken, as expected, showed I had an HbA1c reading of 57mmol, which is about 10 mmol higher than I want it to be. This indicates that my blood sugar level has been higher than it should be over the past three months. HbA1c is a blood test that shows your average blood glucose level over a three-month period. Someone without any kind of diabetes would have a reading in the mid-to-low 30s. Anything from 42mmol downward is considered non-diabetic, 42-47 is considered pre-diabetic and 48 and above is considered diabetic. One of my main health aims is to reduce my HbA1c to 48 or below, which is not an easy job with type-1 diabetes, but achievable with discipline and hard work.

I'm also tested on the AccunIQ machine – a highly sophisticated bit of kit that measures body composition including visceral fat (mine is 17 when in an ideal world it should be 8 max), overall percentage body fat (mine is 50 when it should be 30 or lower), basal metabolic rate (mine is 1650 kcal, which is how much energy I burn at rest), and more. The machine also gives me a target weight of 79.1kg, which means I need to lose 40.6kg to get there! It will be interesting to look back at these readings after a year and see how they change.

FASTING AND FEASTING

One of the core principles of the programme is eating in a time-restricted window. Intermittent fasting is a strategy that works brilliantly for managing my blood sugar and dropping weight, but I find it difficult to stick to at home. On the retreat though, it's easy! Dinner is served from 5.45pm and eating is done by 7pm. You don't then eat again until

brunch the following day at 10.45am, with no snacks in between.

We fast every day for approximately 16 hours and then eat two generous meals within an eight-hour period. Only having to think about food twice a day is a relief, as for me it means fewer insulin injections and less blood-sugar fluctuation.

And when we do eat, the food is outstanding and not at all restrictive, despite being reduced carb and almost no sugar, which is great for me. Ingredients are grown largely in the Combe Grove kitchen garden. Brunch can be chickpea pancakes with roasted vegetables, eggs prepared in every way imaginable, and, one of my favourites, smoked mackerel pâté. Brunch also includes a vegetable health shot and a small bowl of fruit with yoghurt, nuts and seeds. Coffee and tea are optional.

The dinner menu includes a salad-based starter followed by several choices, such as grilled chicken breast, halibut fillet, roasted rump of lamb, grilled "buffaloumi" salad, and grilled hispi cabbage, all beautifully conceived by lead nutritionist Emma Patch and prepared by head chef Marco Appel and sous chef Rachel Milsom. The baked salmon with tomatoes, lemon, olives and vegetables is divine!

Meals are served in The Orangery – an impressive room replete with muralled ceiling, enormous windows and a candle-lit dining table. It's a delightful space in which to enjoy your meals. The pre-dinner mocktails from British botanical brand Pentire and locally made kefir and kombucha by Hanora Health are also a treat.

WELL CARED FOR

Each day offers workshops led by Dr Murdoch – the kind of doctor we all wish we had – and dieticians Dr Emily Porter and Dr Rebecca Hiscutt. I am reminded of things I already know and also gain a better understanding of medical matters related to metabolism and general health. The workshops also highlight how it's the small, consistent changes that have the most impact.

My one-on-one consultation with Dr Rebecca Hiscutt feels more



There's plenty of time to enjoy the facilities on your week-long retreat, including two pools, steam room, hydro-therapy beds and a gym.



You can enjoy a guided walk in the beautiful surrounds of the estate.



'Combe Grove is a pioneering new health retreat centred around long-term lifestyle change'



Consultant GP at Combe Grove, Dr Campbell Murdoch.

Meals are served in The Orangery, using ingredients grown in Combe Grove's kitchen garden.



This retreat is about resetting your metabolism with expert guidance'

like a quest to discover my inner self than simply gathering more nutrition information. I'm able to have an honest conversation about my challenges with sugar and carbs, and she helps me to identify what's hindering me. Dr Hiscutt then offers practical solutions, and introduces me to the work of Dr Jen Unwin, a clinical psychologist who specialises in carb addiction.

My consultation with Dr Hiscutt feels transformative; as I leave the room, I feel a sense of clarity, like I have had a breakthrough and know what I need to do when I go home. For me, it's all about implementing strategies to reduce the amount of insulin I require. Whilst insulin keeps me alive, it is also a fat-storage hormone and there are lots of things I can do differently to reduce the

amount of insulin I use and the amount of fat my body stores.

All the staff members are wonderful, and I feel so well looked after throughout the week. I particularly enjoy my chats with team leader Hilary Woods, who shares that her son is also type-1 diabetic. It's comforting having someone around who just "gets it".

On the treatment side of things, reflexology with Rosalind Oxenford is the best I've experienced; structural integration with Nicki O'Clarey is near-miraculous and immensely releasing on my tight joints; naturopathy with Lucy Peele offers my first experience with a castor oil compress and with deeply relaxing reiki; and my deep tissue massage with Rhiannon Lomax definitely hits all the right spots.



The heated outdoor pool boasts magnificent views.

THE FUTURE OF HEALTH RETREATS

Combe Grove is pioneering a new kind of retreat centred around long-term lifestyle change and has the potential to become a world-renowned health destination, in my opinion. From the moment you book in, you feel genuinely cared for.

There's no weigh-in as you arrive or leave, unlike with many health holidays, as the impact of this retreat goes beyond the seven days you're here. I now have almost a year of online support to look forward to, including regular blood tests and one-to-one contact with Combe Grove's experts to assess my progress and guide me.

And while I do return home a few pounds lighter, it's more about my renewed focus on self-care, healthier habits, and personal wellness goals that matters. I am already planning to return, along with my mum and sister, who are both health retreat sceptics but since my glowing report, they are now checking their diaries to see when we can all go!

The core retreat at Combe Grove is the Metabolic Health Programme for Optimum Health. More specialist programmes are also now available to support those with prediabetes and women in perimenopause. Retreats for gut health and to prepare for operations launch in 2024. Prices start from £2,600 for the retreats, which include a year-long follow-up programme. Find out more at combegrove.com.

Stunning views from Combe Grove over Limpley Stoke Valley.

