

writer **Rebecca Walker**

WELLNESS IN WILDERNESS

Ulpotha is not your average retreat. Hiding at the foothills of the Galgiriya Mountains deep in Sri Lanka's rural hinterland with a sacred history that dates back thousands of years, this ancient pilgrimage site sprawls across 20 lush acres of tangled jungle and organic rice paddy fields. Run by the local community who preserve the ancient traditions of village life at every turn, it offers guests a glimpse into the beauty of simplicity.



I arrive at Ulpotha at two am in the pouring rain. I'd dozed off in the car during the three-hour trip from Colombo airport and am abruptly woken when the door swings open and a torch-lit face smiles at me from under an umbrella. Half asleep and completely disoriented, I follow in the rain as we wander down a winding path into the jungle beyond. Navigating slippery mud and giant puddles, eventually we arrive at the little hut that will be my home for the next 10 days. Exhausted after a long day of transit, I barely register my surroundings as I climb under a mosquito net onto a mattress on the floor and collapse into sleep.

DAY ONE

I wake late the next day and feel instantly peaceful as I drink in the sound of birdsong and the view of lush rice fields lying less than one metre from my open-air hut. I venture outside in search of a shower and come across the 'bathroom' (an outdoor tap suspended from a tree branch amid the trees). An involuntary squeal escapes me as I duck under the chilly current, catapulting me into alertness.

Ulpotha's guest manager, Susie, comes to collect me for a tour of the property and like everything else here, her manner is relaxed and informal. She guides me around the *walauwwa* (main house) and *wedegera* (Ayurvedic clinic), introducing the retreat's handful of staff by name. Local children play in the outdoor courtyard, friendly dogs lope around the footpaths and retreat-goers sprawl lizard-like in the *ambalamba* (outdoor pavillion), creating an atmosphere of one big friendly family.

I catch sight of squirrels and rabbits in the grass as we stroll up to the retreat's famous lake and as we near the yoga shala, playful monkeys bound across the path in front of us (at which point I ask Susie if the animals have been trained to put on a good show for new guests). Rickety lounge swings hang from trees, handmade rafts rest by the lake's edge, and while the trails around the grounds are well formed, they are in no way manicured (or sign-posted for that matter). Above all else I am struck by the mystic atmosphere and raw beauty of it all.

After a delicious lunch comprised of organic vegetables (grown in Ulpotha's own gardens), various red rices and Sri Lankan curries, I head back to my hut and spend the afternoon reading and snoozing. At one point I instinctively reach for my phone to see if I have any messages before suddenly realising not only do I have no phone signal, but there's no internet. This makes me feel simultaneously panicked and relieved as I officially change frequencies to jungle mode. After an early dinner, I follow dancing fireflies back to my lantern-lit hut, tuck myself back into bed and go to sleep listening to the sounds of chirping geckos and crickets. Bliss.



THIS PAGE: A friendly monkey; one of the local children playing in the lake; the organic vegetable garden, all photographed by Susana Scott. OPPOSITE PAGE: a retreat-goer enjoys a late afternoon snooze, photographed by Susana Scott. OPENING PAGE: Yoga on Willy's Rock, photo courtesy of Stephen Thomas.

DAY TWO

I've arrived at Ulpotha on the final day of a two-week yoga workshop preceding the one I will be doing but wake early and join the morning class anyway. The teacher begins chanting and, on cue, the other students join in. I'm not familiar with the *mantras* (chants), so hum along instead. After about 30 minutes we begin a *pranayama* (breathing) sequence, and with each exhale I imagine the stagnant city energy of Hong Kong leaving my body.

The session is infused with long pauses of meditation and I am surprised to find myself slipping easily into a state of calm stillness. I have an extremely active mind and usually find it hard to get into the meditation 'zone' (despite years of trying!), yet almost without effort feel my mind going quiet in this setting. My concentration is absolute, yet effortless and even when the teacher tells us we can lie down and rest, I feel magnetically rooted into place and continue sitting.

We move into an easygoing *asana* (posture) practice filled with long, gentle stretches that loosen my plane-induced muscle kinks. At one point I look up to see a snake winding its way through the layers of the thatched roof as I lie on my back stretching, and pray it doesn't lose its grip and fall.

After yoga I head to my first treatment: a structural energy awareness (SEA) massage, carried out by fellow retreat-goer and healer, Eric. Taking its influences from

Thai massage, SEA uses a combination of massage and stretching techniques to clear energy blockages along the body's invisible energy channels or '*prana nadis*.' Ideal for chronic pain and injuries, it uses thumbing techniques to manipulate rigid muscles and concentrates on lengthening and repositioning tendons and fascia (connective tissue).

I've been carrying a sciatic nerve injury for about six months and Eric quickly hones in on the muscles in my left hamstring and quad. Using strong pressure, he digs his thumbs (and heels!) into my resistant thigh and I feel the tension starting to ease. Working his way around the rest of my body, he stretches my limbs like a skilled puppeteer and by the time the massage finishes I feel like a floppy rag doll.

I spend the afternoon reading and writing and head to the yoga shala in the early evening. We've all trekked to the jungle to participate in the 'dynamic hatha yoga and intensive pranayama' retreat led by Canadian teacher, Stephen Thomas. Influenced by his studies in classical hatha yoga, Buddhism and Tantra (among others), Stephen's teachings are rooted in the concept of awakening the yogi's divine essence or 'true self' by exploring the purification practices of *asana*, *kriya*, *pranayama*, *mantra*, meditation and devotion.

Stephen begins by talking us through the English translations of some of the Sanskrit *mantra* we will be exploring during the retreat. As he explains, *mantra* is a Vedic

purification ritual that uses the vibrations of sacred sound (sung in Sanskrit) to tune the body's energy and elevate consciousness into a higher state of awareness. Used as an invocation practice, chanting *mantra* with spiritual intention and precision is said to awaken the dormant cosmic energies of particular (Hindu) deities, thereby aligning the yogi with the divine.

Although I have been practising yoga for a number of years I have never had the opportunity to properly explore the practice of *mantra*; truth be told, as someone who finds new languages extremely hard, I've always been somewhat intimidated by it. Consequently, when Stephen leads us into a call/response session, the Sanskrit words form clumsily in my mouth and spill out in a self-conscious mumble (no doubt the Hindu gods put their hands over their ears and went back to sleep at this point). We complete the session with a series of restorative stretches, backbends and gentle inversions.

It's dark by the time we finish and I head to the 'hot showers' for the first time. By shower I mean transferring hot water from a fire-heated cauldron into a bucket then mixing it with cold water from another bucket and ladling spoonfuls of warm water over myself under the stars (all by torchlight). Although a little confronting to the average city dweller's convenience-driven sensibilities, this rudimentary bathing ritual reflects the no-frills, back-to-basics way of life embraced by Ulpotha.

DAY THREE

I wake before my alarm goes off (miracle!) and wander to the breakfast hut for a cup of tea before heading to yoga. We begin with a *mantra* inviting the Hindu god of transition and 'remover of obstacles,' Ganesha, into the space, followed by a *pranayama* session.

Traditionally practised before *asana* to shift consciousness and heighten the frequency of *prana* (energy) in the body, *pranayama* is an ancient yogic breath awareness technique used to cleanse the body and mind. Expressed through controlled breathing patterns, it is said to aid in the release of 'psychic knots' by purifying and creating spaciousness in the *prana nadi's*. As Stephen points out, "where the breath goes, *prana* follows and where the *prana* goes, the mind follows."

In the same way that *asana* practice has hundreds of different poses, there is a wide array of *pranayama* exercises, '*kriyas*' (nostril purification) techniques and '*bandhas*' (energy locks). Beginning with *kapalabati* (fast abdominal breathing), Stephen leads us through a sequence of practices that include *nadi shodhana* (alternate nostril breathing), *bhramari* (humming), *sitali* (tongue hissing), *uddiyana bandhas* (abdominal locks) and *jihva bandhas* (tongue locks). During each exercise, Stephen talks us through the process of *puraka* (inhalation), *rechaka* (exhalation) and *kumbhaka* (retention) and by the time we finish I feel like fog has begun to lift from my mind.

After lunch I meet with Ulpotha's resident Ayurvedic doctor, Dr. Srilal Mudunkothge, for a consultation. He takes my blood pressure and asks me questions about my lifestyle and energy habits before classifying my '*dosha*' (body type) as a *vata/pitta* blend. Dr. Srilal follows this with a stream of advice, telling me I should eat foods that are warm, cooked, nourishing, and easy to digest along with fresh vegetables and fruits that are watery and sweet. He also tells me I should avoid alcohol (ha!) and overworking (double ha!), encouraging me to maintain regular eating and sleeping habits (slim chance) and cultivate an exercise routine that incorporates meditative practices such as yoga (tick).

The evening yoga class is another restorative session focussed on hip openers. Adopting a slow pace, we hold each pose for a lengthy period with the intention of breathing into the tightness and 'spaces' of our bodies. My hips are super tight due to too much time sitting at a desk and although some poses have me inwardly wincing, I follow Stephen's gentle guidance and imagine fluid, healing *prana*

flowing through my body.

The intensity of any yoga retreat is largely governed by the teaching style of its leader and it's clear from the get-go that we're in experienced hands. Deep, yet accessible, Stephen's teachings dance between the abstract and practical with well-paced ease. Imbued with insightful philosophy, historical context and snippets of wisdom passed down from his guru Sri O.P Tiwari, his delivery is calm, compelling and sincere, laced with personal anecdotes and a splash of humour.

DAY FOUR

I wake with tender muscles and wander to morning practice with a little less energy than previous days. For the first time my mind comes into play during *pranayama* as nagging worries about work and the backlog of unanswered emails that no doubt wait in my inbox try to distract me. My mind and breath play a tug of war for my attention but my focus eventually slips back into my body – the feeling is that of watching a set of scales tipping back and forth before finding balance. We finish the sequence with *nadi shodhana* and Stephen urges us to imagine inhaling the energy of the moon through the left nostril and sun on the right, the goal of which is to merge the two energies in the middle and stimulate the 'central channel.'

We move into *asana* practice, beginning with side stretches to open the ribs and spend much of the class focusing on chest (heart) openers and backbends. Although we are doing fairly basic poses, Stephen draws our attention to precise alignment, the effect of

which is potent. By the end of the class I am totally fatigued and recline into the embrace of *savasana* (corpse pose) with relief.

After a mid-morning nap and some lunch I head up to the lake for a swim and the physical heaviness of my limbs lifts immediately as I float frog-like through the water. I follow the cue of the locals and take this opportunity to wash my hair as tiny fish nibble at my legs and feet. I climb onto the bank and as I lie in the sun to dry, feel all stress dissolving as my mind detaches from the world outside Ulpotha.

Although refreshed, my body is still feeling tired and I'm secretly relieved when we're told our afternoon yoga class has been replaced with a walk to a nearby cliff top and cave. After a bit of uphill mountainside scrambling, we reach the peak and are greeted with the sight of the postcard-worthy valley below. The group chatters for a while then falls silent as we watch as the sun dips behind the mountain. Stephen leads us into a *mantra* devoted to bringing our potential into being and upon finishing, asks us to set an intention (a thought, goal or desire) that we want to manifest into reality. My mind becomes crystal clear as a number of heartfelt intentions spring to mind. All in all, it's an uplifting end to an interesting day.

DAY FIVE

I wake early and spend an hour or so absorbing the waking morning around me. The effect of being in such a raw natural environment is taking hold and I can feel my innate body rhythm kicking in.





THIS PAGE: Yoga practice with Stephen Thomas photographed by Hank Yang. OPPOSITE PAGE: Bicycles photographed by Susanna Scott; food courtesy of Stephen Thomas; and lighting the lanterns photographed by Susanna Scott.

Although I'm generally healthy, my lifestyle in Hong Kong is in such drastic contrast to the pace at Ulpotha. At home I'm constantly running from one stimulating activity to another, gulping coffees like water and pushing my body beyond its natural limits. Caught up in the rat race of fast-paced efficiency, I work hard, eat on the run, go to bed late, and often find myself craving for downtime pushed to the wayside by my social spirit. Consequently, I usually find it extremely difficult to get out of bed in the morning and rarely wake feeling 'rested.' Here, on the other hand, I feel like everything (including me) moves in slow motion and I wake each day feeling deeply refreshed.

Pranayama is beginning to feel like a natural way to start the day and I head to class in a reflective mood. I went to sleep thinking about the fresh intentions I've set and can feel myself slipping into an introverted headspace. Stephen guides us into *mantra* and instead of joining in I simply chant in my head. As we move into *pranayama* I can feel emotions stirring and although I breathe through the sensation, suddenly feel mentally drained and incredibly tired (despite sleeping for 10 hours the night before!).

I decide to skip *asana* practice, opting for a Shiatsu massage instead. Borrowing from the ancient eastern philosophy of acupuncture, Shiatsu is a Japanese technique that aims to release blocked 'Qi' (energy) from the 'meridians' (energy channels) through massage. After a long chat and 'hara' diagnosis (energetic body scan), my therapist, Louise, comes to the conclusion that my constitu-

tion matches that of earth, an element that displays emotional traits such as pensiveness, mental acuity and worry (yes, yes and yes); and that I have overactive spleen energy and depleted kidney energy. She manipulates my muscles through gentle stretches, using her palms, forearms and elbows to get into my tighter muscles, and by the time we finish I feel much more balanced and clear-minded.

After my massage I head to lunch and after a sizable helping (my belly is getting bigger by the day), fall asleep on the couch only to wake three hours later. Although amazed at the epic amount of sleeping I'm doing, I feel as though I am ridding myself of antique fatigue that I've been carrying underneath my 'just keep going' attitude. And it feels GOOD.

In honour of the full moon, we meet early evening to carry out a 'five elements ritual'. Starting with earth, we head to Ganesha's shrine where retreat-goer, Kathryn, guides us through an emotion-balancing ceremony based on the ancient Taoist 'five-elements theory.' According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, specific emotions are linked to one of the five elements (wood/anger, fire/joy, earth/worry, metal/grief, water/fear). Further, that each emotion correlates to a sound (anger/shouting, joy/laughing, worry/singing, grief/crying, fear/groaning).

To balance the emotions, Kathryn leads us into a sound exercise that entails making the sound of each element for a few minutes, the purpose of which she tells us, is to clear elemental imbalances and help us realise our emotions are part of a fluid cycle.

Stephen finishes the session by asking us to lie belly-down on the earth (sans mat), with the intention of grounding and connecting to our deepest roots.

The next element is water and covered in dirt, we walk in silence to the lake. Touching on concepts of abundance, flow and impermanence, Stephen talks to us about the transitory nature of life and encourages us to surrender to flow by embracing change – to extend gratitude for life's blessings, but not hold onto them too tightly. To illustrate his point he asks us to submerge ourselves in the lake, scooping water up into our hearts in a gesture of receiving and letting it flow through our fingers and back to its source. We do this while chanting to the Hindu goddess of abundance, Lakshmi.

We climb back up the bank to a waiting bonfire and sing another *mantra*, this time focusing on the concept of potential and transformation. In a symbol of sacrifice, we each throw a handful into the fire in acknowledgement of our willingness to embrace transformation and leave behind that which no longer serves. As Stephen points out, a divine flame burns within each of us and by connecting with it we can manifest transformation at any time.

The final element is air and we begin a session of *nadi shodhana* to cleanse and balance the body's solar/lunar energy. As the ritual draws to a close, I turn to see the full moon rising in the sky and slide into meditation. Although the day has been a quiet and withdrawn one for me, it has also been the most powerful so far.

DAY SIX

The minute I open my eyes I know my energy has shifted drastically since yesterday. My head feels clear and my body feels energised (no sore muscles this morning) and I head to morning *asana* practice with fresh enthusiasm. Stephen's wife and fellow yoga teacher, Manuela, leads the class. Touching on themes of acceptance, grace and surrender, Manuela murmurs nourishing words of encouragement as she guides us through various side bends to open the torso before moving into deeper twisting stretches. We explore a series of dynamic poses and Manuela guides our attention back to the breath while we hold each pose for at least 30 seconds more than our aching limbs would like.

There is no yoga scheduled for the afternoon and I take this chance to go for a bike ride around the local area with Stephen and Manuela. We encounter an array of smiling faces, the occasional tuk tuk and a herd of buffalo as we pedal past lush fields, lakes and village houses. After so much introspection this lighthearted moment is a welcome shift in gears and as I soak up the sunshine, I feel a child-like joy wash over me that stays with me for the rest of the evening.

DAY SEVEN

I wake just after five am and after a few false starts (hello snooze button), sleepily wander up to the *walauwva*. The group slowly trickles in and at around 5.30am we start proceeding to the hillside monastery. It's still dark and as we trek up the mountainside path, nature takes advantage of my foggy senses as I walk straight into an army of seriously angry ants whose bites have the potency of bee stings. I then proceed to walk directly into a tree branch and trip ungracefully on a displaced log, by which time my concentration kicks in for the day.

We squelch our way barefoot through a muddy gully before ascending to the cliffside peak where sunrise is beginning to dawn. As I watch rays of sunlight spread across the valley below, I am once again awed by nature's beauty and stare trance-like into the horizon. After a while I slip into crossed legs and begin meditating. Although my eyes are closed, I can feel the sun rising over me and imagine its energy filling my body.

Like pilgrims on a holy quest, we move further up the hill into one of the monastery's caves where Stephen leads us into a Buddhist *mantra* in honour of our sacred setting. I

suddenly feel a magnetic urge to lie down, almost like a hand has pushed me over. I do so (although later find out this is a big no no in shrines) and bask in the echoing chants of my fellow yogis.

This feeling of surrender is an ongoing theme for me during my time at Ulpotha. In the past I have used retreats to push my boundaries – physically, spiritually and emotionally – devoting myself to consciousness expansion at whatever cost (usually a teary meltdown). This retreat however, I feel compelled to nurture myself gently. Reflected in simple gestures like bowing out of *asana* practice, eating second servings at every meal and opting out of certain group activities to spend time alone, I feel very in touch with my body's energetic needs and sense my intuition thanking me for listening to it.

After heading back down the mountain my growling stomach leads me straight to the breakfast hut where I indulge in fresh pineapple, ladyfinger bananas off the branch and coconut pancakes. Due to the early start, Stephen has offered an optional breathing class and when I get to the shala, discover I am the only one participating.

We grab some straw mats and head up to Ganesha's shrine where we perform a sequence of breathwork devoted to abundance and restoration. We finish in a posture of meditation and when I open my eyes, discover Stephen has left. The rejuvenating effects of the practice (namely a clearer head and deep sense of groundedness) take hold as I sit alone under the trees gazing past Ganesha's statue to the wild tapestry of jungle beyond.

After a week at Ulpotha I have perfected the art of daydreaming and pass the hours of the afternoon reading and napping on a shady swing. My mental angst has all but dissolved and if there was an award for staring off into space lost in thought, I think I'd win hands down.

This goes to highlight one of the retreat's greatest strengths: allowing people unhurried time and unlimited space to find a deep sense of personal peace. There are no obligations here. If you are in a contemplative mood or feeling emotional you can easily withdraw and make yourself scarce; flipside, if you're feeling social, there is always someone to chat to over a cup of herbal tea. For me, time is the ultimate luxury and during my stay I come to realise that sometimes it's not the things you do, but the things you *don't* do that make all the difference.





DAY EIGHT

After skipping *asana* yesterday, I feel hungry for movement as I head to the yoga shala for morning practice. We begin with our usual *mantras* and I feel agitation starting to rise as my perfectionist streak rears its ugly head. Rather like taking up a new instrument or learning a new language, the practice of *mantra* is something that takes time and repetition to cement – in other words it's not something that can be perfected in eight days. Yet as I forget certain words and sing the odd wrong line, find myself feeling frustrated at my own bad memory.

This agitation builds when I can't seem to move my breath from my chest to my diaphragm during *pranayama* practice. Ironically the more frustrated I get the more 'out of body' I become. My inner voice is telling me 'you should know this stuff by now,' which in turn distracts my focus and further feeds my agitation. By the time I finally manage to silence my mind, Stephen signals the end of class. Argh!

I desperately want to move my body and during the break, spend my time doing handstands. This pulls me out of my head and snaps me into a playful mood that stays with me as we bend and stretch through a set of hamstring stretches, shoulder openers and headstands.

After breakfast I head to a Reiki session. Based on an ancient Buddhist healing technique, Reiki is a holistic Japanese therapy that facilitates the smooth flow of 'Qi' through the body by clearing blockages in the *meridians* and *chakras* (energy centres). Channelled through the healer's

hands via subtle touch, the method is said to re-balance areas of disharmony on a physical, emotional and psychic level, activating the body's natural ability to heal itself.

My healer, Caroline, begins my treatment and a warm tingling sensation washes over me, starting in my head and eventually moving its way down to my legs. As she moves her hands around my body, various people and situations come to mind and my throat suddenly feels constricted. I know from previous experience that this is a sign of a blocked throat *chakra* (which relates to expression), and as I guide my thoughts to healing ones, the sensation slowly subsides only to be replaced by a piercing pain in my left ring finger (which is linked to the heart line).

Caroline moves down to my legs and I can feel a dull ache through my left hamstring and knee as my feet start to twitch involuntarily (a sign of stagnant energy leaving the body). I feel myself slipping into deep relaxation and before I know it, Caroline is shaking me telling me we're done. Although subtle, I feel distinct shifts in my body – particularly through my left leg, which feels much lighter and freer to walk on.

Late afternoon we all gather in the shala to chant *mantra*. Stephen talks to us about the power of the body's feminine energy (known as '*shakti*'), describing it as a space in which our infinite potential resides. Further, that by waking this energy and tapping into it we can expand consciousness, guided by the intuition of the 'higher self.' We complement his teachings by chanting to the divine energy of the Hindu goddess of knowledge and creativity, Saraswati.

DAY NINE

Unlike the day before, I wake with aching muscles, crawl delicately out of bed and dread the thought of *asana* practice. This brings to light one of the biggest challenges of a yoga retreat: pacing yourself. At home I do a one-hour class three to four times a week, here on the other hand, classes are twice daily and run up to three hours each. Consequently, a yo-yo of physical (and emotional) highs and lows is inevitable as you push your body past its usual limits.

Despite my physical fatigue, my mind and my concentration feel sharp and I glide through *mantra* and *pranayama* with focused ease. Stephen leads us into a gentle *asana* class that highlights the nuances of good alignment and although I didn't think I was capable of making it through the whole practice, find my muscles responding happily to the stretches. We explore the art of handstands and I finish the class feeling uplifted and energised.

After lunch I head to the *wedegera* for some R & R. I've opted for a herbal oil massage and my smiling therapist Rani greets me with a sarong and some funky nappy-style underpants. As I take a seat, she drizzles warm oil into the crown of my skull and begins a powerful head massage using brisk strokes and the occasional hair tug. I instantly melt into relaxation mode and break out in goosebumps as she hones in on the pressure points at the base of my skull.

Moving to the massage table, I lie on my back as Rani pours warm oil all over my body, rubbing it into my dry skin using

shallow pressure to stimulate circulation. The oil is made from sesame, beeswax and a mixture of distilled herbs and spices and as I emerge from the room, I'm surprised to see I'm covered in a thick red slick.

Rani guides me into another room where a bath filled with random jungle foliage and what looks like dirt (they're actually herbs) awaits. I anticipate cold water and climb into the bath a little wearily but am pleasantly surprised to discover it's warm, much to the relief of my tired, aching muscles. I'm left submerged for about 20 minutes until I am once again ushered into another room. This time Rani covers me in a green bean paste to soak up the excess oil then ladles warm water over me. The ritual draws to a close with the reward of dewy, velvety skin.

The afternoon *asana* class adopts a passive 'yin' style and Stephen guides us through some seriously intense hip stretches that have my muscles screaming. As a lunar practice, yin yoga incorporates deep, long postures that enhance greater flexibility in the joints, ligaments and fascia tissue of the hips, pelvis and lower spine. Stephen makes us hold each pose for what feels like a lifetime, inviting us to explore our 'edges' and release tension. Although the class is intense, the after-effects are potent and I walk out of the room feeling like my legs are at least five centimetres longer.

DAY TEN

My alarm shrills at five am and I grumpily climb out of bed. Today is my last day and I spent last night tossing and turning as thoughts of reality nibbled at the outskirts of my mind. I meet the rest of the group in the breakfast hut and we head into the jungle by torchlight and begin our ascent to one of Ulpotha's best views – 'Willy's Rock.'

Following a local guide, we make our way through dense trees with no real path in sight. As we climb up and over huge, slippery boulders onto the mountainside my aching legs start to protest and I decide to go barefoot in fear of plummeting down the rock face. After about half an hour we reach the summit in time for sunrise but are greeted with thick cloud cover instead. Regardless, the view is beautiful and deep gratitude washes over me as I drink in deep breaths of fresh, gusty wind. I close my eyes as memories of the last 10 days flit through my mind's eye and without even trying, slip into meditation.

I relish every minute of my last afternoon and spend it reading, writing, napping and chatting to Stephen. I'm feeling reflective but uplifted, as though my soul is smiling. A wistful twinge overcomes me as I pack up my belongings and leave my borrowed home, however the emotion quickly passes because I know with certainty that this won't be my last visit to Ulpotha. www.ulpotha.com
www.stephenthomasyoga.com



THIS PAGE: the lake at dusk, photographed by Susanna Scott. OPPOSITE PAGE: Meditation class with Stephen, photographed by Susanna Scott.

authentic philanthropy

When asked how Ulpotha evolved into the self-sustaining sanctuary that it is today, the property's unassuming owner, Viren Perera, quotes a Taoist aphorism: "The unaimed arrow never misses its mark." Created slowly and quietly back in 1997, long before sustainable tourism became a trendy marketing catchphrase, Ulpotha started as "a fun side project" that grew legs and started walking on its own accord.

Bound by the vision of bringing the traditions of Sri Lanka's age-old agrarian culture back to life, Viren and his two friends, Giles Scott and Mudiyanse Tennekoon (now deceased), enlisted the help of the locals and went about transforming the property into a bio-diverse organic farm. Opening to guests in 2002 when Giles met a yoga teacher looking for a new retreat location, Ulpotha stumbled into the holistic wellness sphere by chance. "Everything unfolded very organically," recalls Giles. "We had no intention of turning Ulpotha into a retreat, it just happened."

Open six months a year (to help preserve the surrounding environment) with a maximum of 20 paying guests at any time, the founder's original ideals still filter through the property's eco policies. Ulpotha is deeply committed to organic farm practices and as well as replanting thousands of local species of trees, all crops are hand planted and harvested. Rice fields are ploughed and threshed by buffalo and nearly all the food consumed in the retreat is grown on-site and cooked on open fires. The property has no electricity and when night falls, it is illuminated by flares, lamps and oil lanterns.

Nestled seamlessly into their self-sustaining surroundings, many of the mud huts scattered around the grounds are inhabited by the Sri Lankan residents who run Ulpotha. Turning the notion of service on its head, the villagers have no formal hospitality training, nor are they on-hand to pander to the whims of each guest (tipping is prohibited). Rather, they go about their daily tasks, mingling happily with visitors to create what Viren describes as, "a sense of belonging." In other words, the local community isn't *part* of Ulpotha it *is* Ulpotha; guests are simply stepping into a lifestyle that carries on regardless of whether they are there or not.

And here's where philanthropy comes in. Ulpotha is a non-profit retreat. All revenue from paying guests is channelled back into the local community and into farm maintenance. "Profit has never been, and will never be, the basis or goal of what we're doing here," stresses Viren. This sentiment is echoed by Giles, "Ulpotha has never been a money making venture for us. We have no plans for expansion and if anything, will downsize and limit our opening months even further."

The retreat's dedication to its local community is best illustrated by the free Ayurvedic clinic it singlehandedly funds by donating 100 percent of guest treatment fees (from its *wedegera*) directly to the running of the clinic. Opened in 2005, the facility honours age-old traditions of Ayurveda and patronage, a system in which patients rarely, if ever, made cash transactions for treatments. Instead, they would make a symbolic offering of betel leaves to the doctor at the time of consultation and make their own services available in exchange. This practice continues in the clinic today, offering free consultations and medication to over 100 local villagers per week.