

specialist holidays
YOGA RETREAT

STEPHANIE DRAX TAKES SOME TIME OUT ON THE ATLANTIC COAST OF COUNTY CLARE, COMBINING YOGA AND RELAXATION WITH TRANQUIL SCENERY AND NUTRITIOUS VEGETARIAN FOOD



In the studio, the slow, mindful practice is focused on the calming and revitalising 'yin' aspect of yoga



The wild beauty of the precipitous Cliffs of Moher, one of Ireland's most popular natural attractions

Retreat' is a noun and a verb, so I am told during my first two-hour yoga practice of the weekend. It is a bricks-and-mortar setting - in this case, simple slate-roofed farmhouses and a state-of-the-art studio perched on the rugged west coast of Ireland in County Clare - and also an invitation to withdraw into one's deeper self.

'Leave outside everything you are to everyone else,' says Michelle Moroney, the co-founder of the Cliffs of Moher Retreat and our tutor. 'Mother, daughter, wife, sister; peel them back and let "her" arrive.' From that moment on, we are urged to luxuriate in the present, and time starts to slow down.

We are 19 guests of varying ages and yoga abilities, and mostly women. We have met over spiced-cherry tea, chocolate power balls and chia brownies, and now we are in a warm yoga studio. During poses, we watch the wind whip through folds of green fields and waves break in the Atlantic Ocean beyond - a scene perfectly framed by the studio's entirely glass façade. The practice is slow and mindful, and when the poses are challenging, Michelle gently asks us to find stillness and to smile. 'It's only yoga,' she says.

This weekend retreat is neither an intense boot-camp nor a hippy commune, but an opportunity for healing in comfort. Michelle and her husband Michael have run retreats all over the world and have brought home the perfect alchemy to relax their guests: nutritious

food, comfortable lodgings and a small, sincere team. We eat abundant, rainbow-coloured vegetarian dishes, with much of the food pulled from the kitchen garden: juicy beet burgers, creamy squash crumble, and coconut and orange cake. In the evening, we curl up on plump sofas in front of blazing fires, sit under the stars in the open-air hot tub or slope off to our peaceful rooms.

There are four two-hour yoga sessions on this two-day retreat, which focus on alignment principles, self-care through deep breathing, revitalising sequences and the 'yin' aspect of yoga - a practice that stretches joints during supine and seated poses. Each day begins with a blissful 30-minute meditation. Candles are lit, South American petrified wood is ceremonially burned and the changeable weather keeps the view fresh under our gaze. The yearly timetable offers week-long courses and visiting tutors, too.

The schedule easily allows time to explore the local area and, happily, the Cliffs of Moher are one of Ireland's most popular natural tourist destinations. Michael (a former tour guide for County Clare) takes us on a windswept walk along the jaw-dropping precipice - a vigorous counterbalance to the yoga. Another optional excursion is to the nearby town of Lahinch, where a few of us take a madcap dip in the freezing Atlantic.

As the weekend winds up, we have all wound down and are scheduling an annual revisit, because here we have found not only a verb and noun, but also a blending of the words 'real' and 'treat'.



Ways and Means

Stephanie Drax travelled as a guest of Healing Holidays (020-7843 3597; healingholidays.co.uk), which has a range of retreats worldwide. A two-night stay at the Cliffs of Moher Retreat (cliffsofmoherretreat.com) costs from £440 per person in a twin room, full-board, including classes and guided walks. Other Cliffs of Moher Retreat courses feature plant-based cookery classes, hiking, meditation, wellness coaching and yoga □