August
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LOVING HEALING

PAMELA GOODMAN samples Datu's hilltop Ayurvedic retreat in Tuscany, where tailored treatments, yoga and nutrition combine to soothe body and soul

PHOTOGRAPHS **MARINA DENISOVA**

OPPOSITE Einkorn saffron risotto with stuffed courgette flower – as food is a principal healing factor in Ayurvedic practice, meals at Datu are plant based and nutrient rich. **THIS PAGE** A feeling of harmony and tranquillity pervades every aspect of the wellness retreat, from the beautiful Tuscan surroundings to the treatments and sessions led by skilled practitioners

On a hilltop 20 minutes' drive east of Siena stands the medieval *borgo* of Laticastelli. A busy road runs at the foot of the hill – the only blot on an otherwise perfect Tuscan landscape of rolling fields and woodlands punctuated by isolated farms and pencil-thin cypress trees. For much of the year, Laticastelli is an exclusive-use venue – for weddings, in the main – but for two month-long periods spanning October to November and March to April, the hamlet is taken over by Datu, a wellness retreat company offering week-long Ayurvedic breaks for 20 or so discerning guests in search of the best treatments and practitioners a little closer to home than Ayurveda's original base, India.

Constantin Bjerke, Datu's founder, describes his own journey from personal crisis to Ayurvedic enlightenment as serendipitous, as he checked himself in – on something of a desperate whim – to Vaidyagrama Ayurveda Hospital in Tamil Nadu in 2021. This led to encounters with Ayurvedic doctors and therapists and, in due course, other specialists in complementary healing practices – among them Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM, to those in the know). And thus came the plan to bring together this collective expertise under one roof, if only for eight weeks a year.

The group I join is predominantly women, drawn from across Europe with an age range from thirties to seventies, the bulk being somewhere in the middle. Our rooms are spread among the village houses on either side of a central cobbled street, with the restaurant and terrace providing a focal point for meals and other fine-weather activities. Elsewhere in Laticastelli, a first-floor salon hosts the yoga studio; a sitting room with an open fire is a sanctuary for evening talks; the treatment centre is housed in what would once have been the limonaia; and the wine cellar is used as a meditation cave. Gardens stretch along the hilltop to a swimming pool with views towards the misty outline of Mount Amiata.

The first few hours of a new group of people coming together are always awkward, but we are united by our uniforms – white pyjamas or kurta, a thick woven cotton poncho, a scarf and a string of prayer beads – which must be worn all week. Electronic gadgets are restricted to bedrooms, while jewellery, perfume and make-up are not allowed. By the end of the week, many of us barely bother to brush our hair.

Joss sticks burn in our rooms, hot-water bottles warm our beds and everyone is given a tongue cleaner – tongues, as it turns out, are a key indicator of physical health in Ayurvedic therapy and TCM. Our tongues are duly photographed and inspected at regular intervals.

So why are we all here? Each guest has a personal reason, but the general idea is to reinvigorate our bodies, calm our minds and uplift our spirits through rest, therapy, yoga, nutrition and deep healing. 'You are moving out of the fast lane,' Constantin tells us on the first night. 'This week is all about you.' Certainly, with more staff than guests, there is a sense of letting go. A little bit woo-woo you might think, but Datu is far from that.

This is a retreat of true integrity. Take the yoga, for example, which the ever-smiling Dr Om Prakash – a respected practitioner of Ayurvedic medicine and one of Datu's principal doctors – laments has lost its essence in the West. Led by the intelligent, soulful Radhika Chaliha, our classes barely touch on yoga as we might know it. Crucially, we are taught to breathe – pranayama and kapalabhati taking centre stage – our asana, or physical, practice evolving to incorporate progressively more movement. There is nothing as crass as a downward dog here.

Each guest is given a different schedule of treatments throughout the week: cupping and acupuncture perhaps, to release energy flow; chi nei tsang to detoxify and rejuvenate internal organs; Ayurveda abhyanga massage to reduce stress and aid relaxation; reflexology; myo-therapy; even clinical psychology for those who need it. Every therapist is a master in their art.

All the while, we are fed amply and creatively, the menu following Ayurvedic sattvic principles of fresh, seasonal, nutrient-dense, plant-based food, adapted to suit local Italian ingredients and Western tastes, yet mildly woven with Indian spices. Surprisingly, we all lose weight.

Constantin glides among us like our own guardian guru, emanating the same sense of non-religious spirituality that pervades this whole retreat. He encourages our participation in the group activities (art therapy, lectures, sound healing, for example) and guides us to the occasional surprise – nothing untoward I should add, but I shall not spoil the fun.

One rainy afternoon I ask him what he would like guests to take away from the week. There are multiple answers, of course, many of which revolve around insight, enrichment and love, but a particular wish is that 'you retake control of the things that have controlled you'. Datu, he hopes, will provide us with both the physical and mental tools to help us on our way □

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WAYS AND MEANS *Datu Wellness Retreats (datuwellness.com) start at £2,950 for seven nights single occupancy, full board, including two Ayurvedic consultations, five private treatment sessions and daily group classes, and excluding flights and transfers. (As part of its mission to share the healing power of ancient Eastern practices with as many people as possible, Datu offers a few rooms at a reduced rate and a small number of scholarships.) The next retreats will take place between October 24 and November 28; dates for March and April 2026 will be released soon.*

OPPOSITE TOP ROW FROM LEFT The central cobbled street of the hamlet of Laticastelli. Sunrise agnihotra, a vedic fire ritual promoting harmony and wellbeing. Founder Constantin Bjerke. MIDDLE ROW Dr Om Prakash conducts sunset agnihotra. Yoga teacher Radhika Chaliha demonstrates kapalabhati breathing. One of the larger guest bedrooms. BOTTOM ROW Art classes serve as a form of mindful meditation. The tranquil hilltop pool. A lunchtime Indian thali served on a banana leaf

EUROPEAN WELLNESS RETREATS

Yeotown

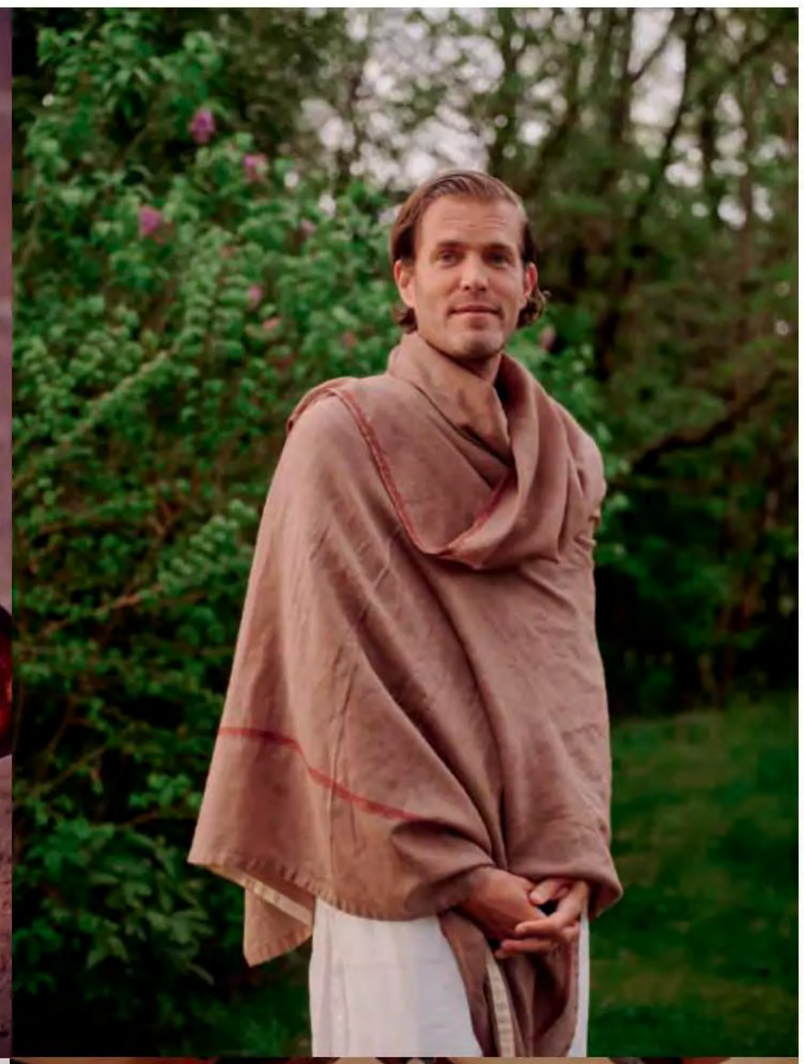
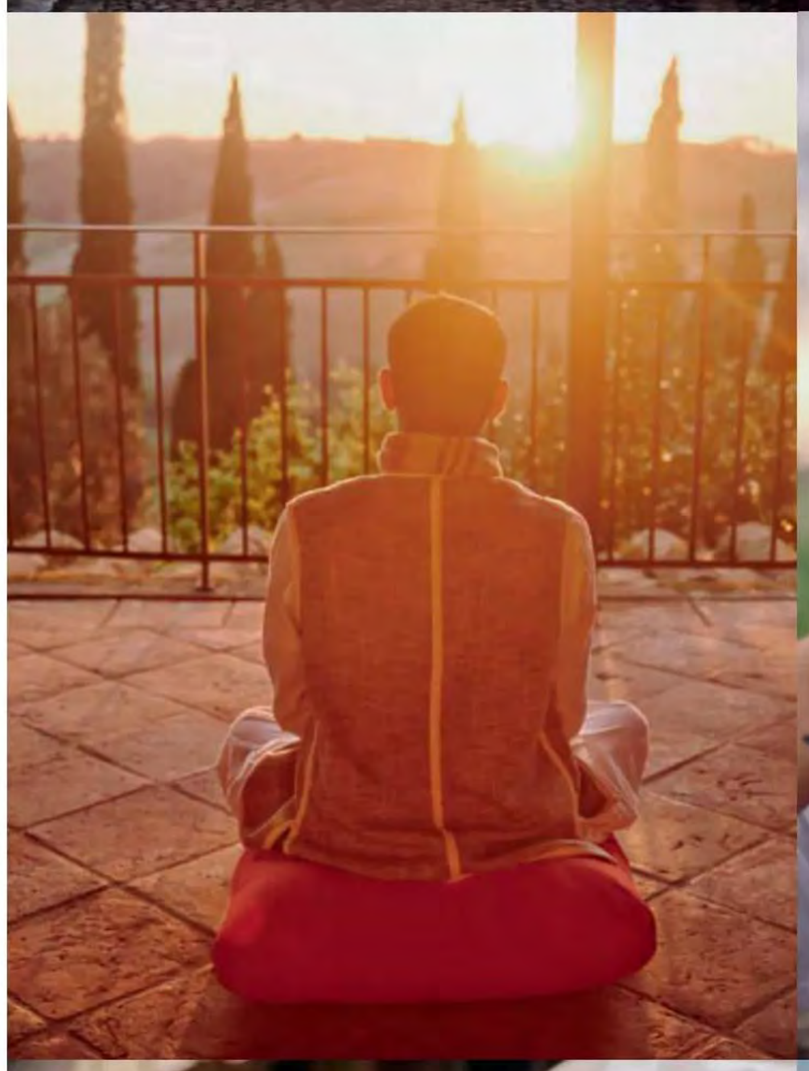
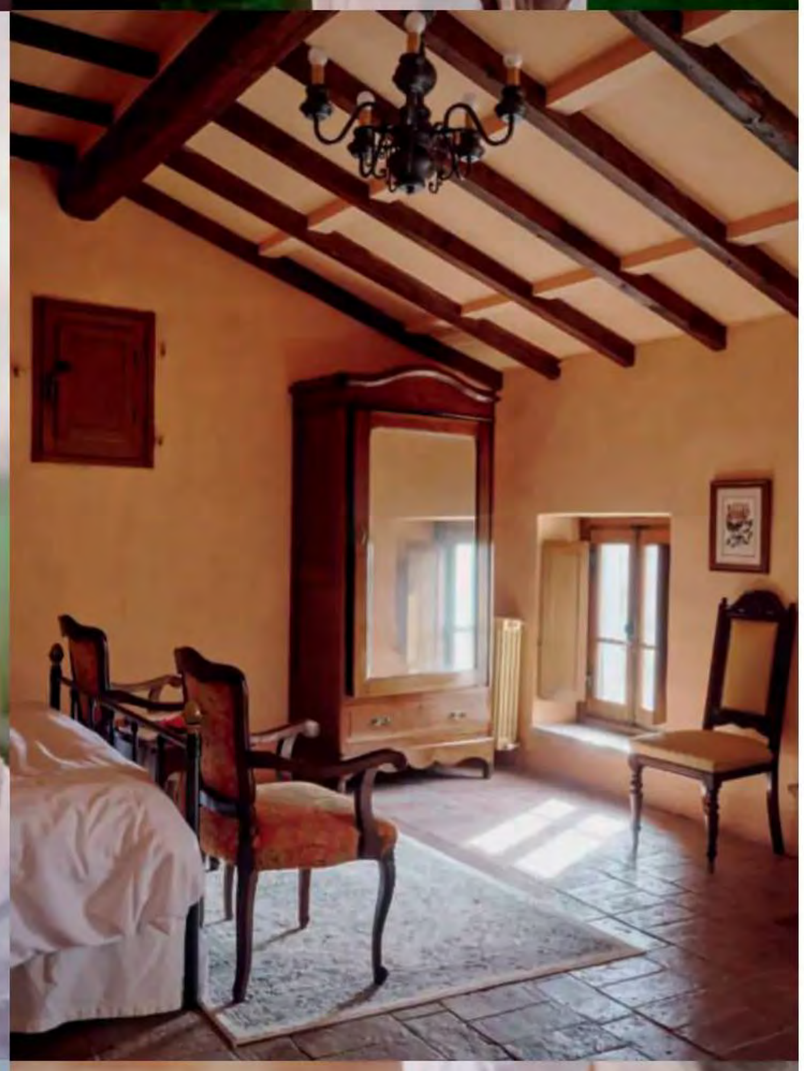
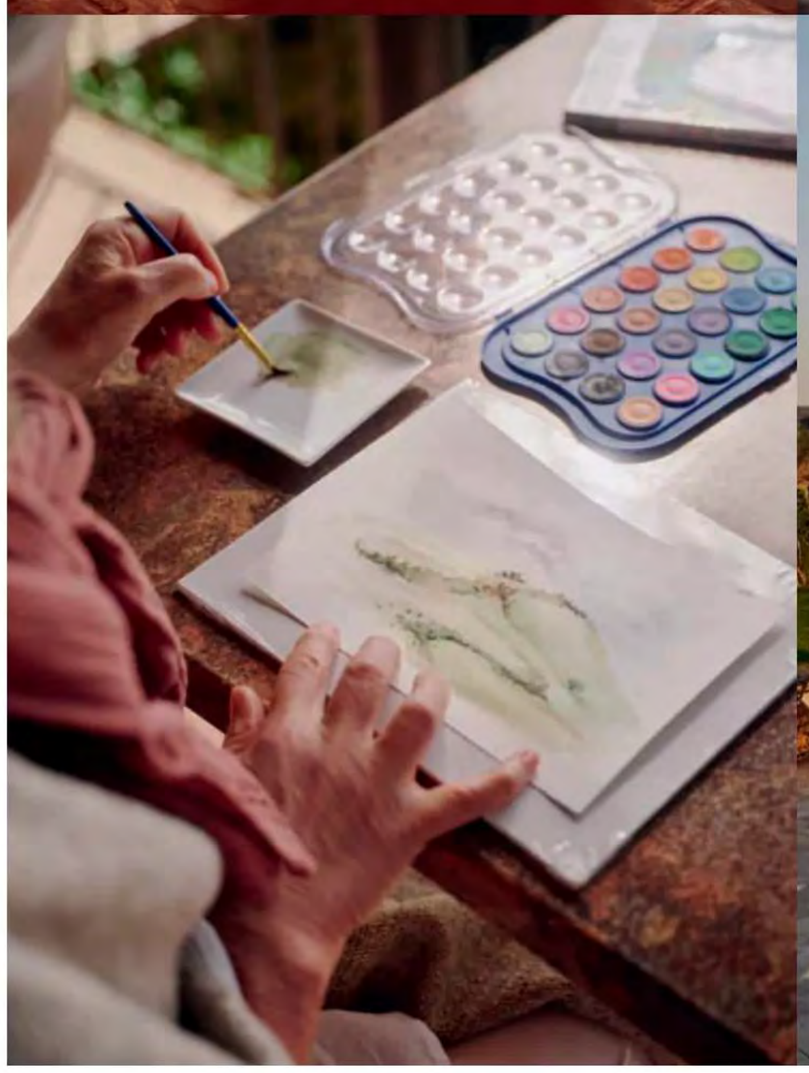
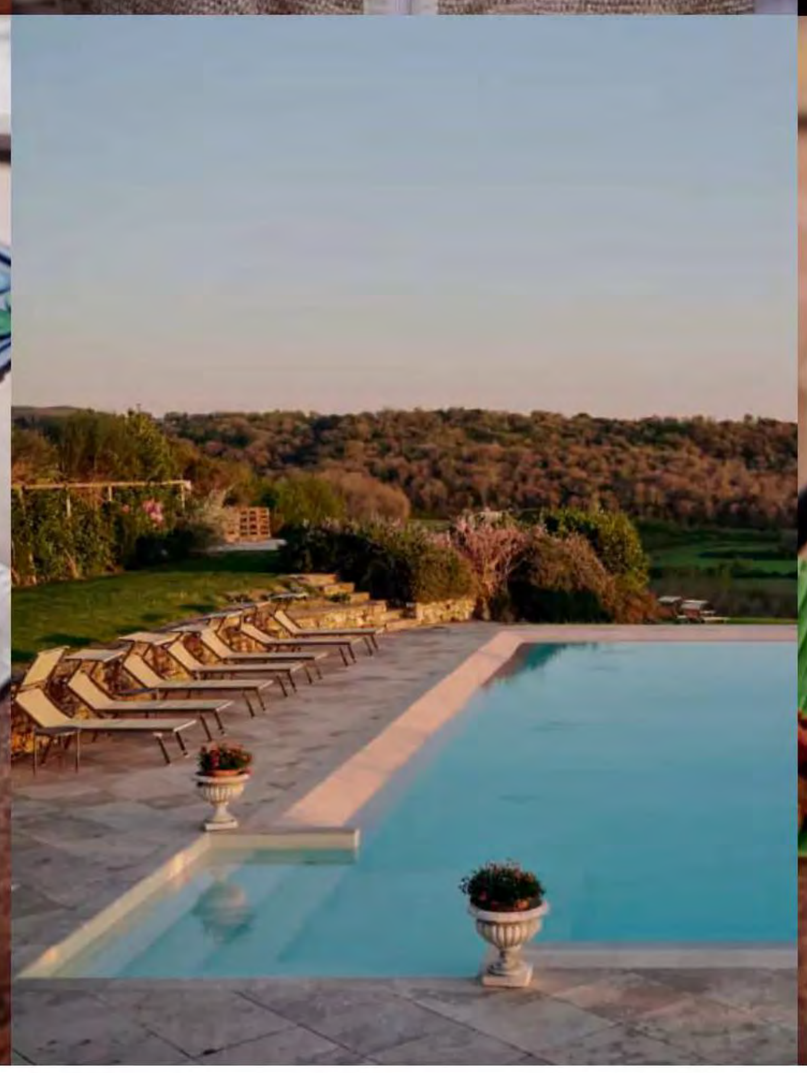
With outposts in North Devon and Madeira, this follows a similar regime to Datu – six-day retreats featuring plant-based menus, yoga, meditation and massage. The difference is the focus on physical activity, with hearty walks, wild swimming and forest bathing forming an integral part of Yeotown's approach to wellness, aimed at helping people feel their strongest, healthiest and most resilient selves. *yeotown.com*

Broughton Sanctuary

In the Yorkshire Dales, this is the only accredited healing hotel in the UK, dedicated to the power of wild well-being through activities and retreats. At its heart is Avalon, a purpose-built, state-of-the-art centre offering a mix of classes, experiences, private events and retreats, hosted by providers from all over the world. *broughtonsanctuary.co.uk*

Euphoria Retreat

This year-round destination spa, near the ancient site of Mystras in the Peloponnese, fuses Ancient Greek healing practices with Traditional Chinese Medicine, designed to take guests on a journey of emotional, physical and also spiritual renewal. A 3,000-square-metre spa is the focal point, where a team of therapists, mentors and wellness practitioners are available to advise, guide and heal. Guests can book specific programmes or retreats, or visit on an ad hoc basis as a hotel guest. *euphoriaretreat.com*

Three useful retreat websites

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