# ROGUE RETREATS

Shady shaman RISKY THERAPY

***From sweat lodges in the scorching desert to hallucinogenic trips with so-called shamans, women are spending thousands in the extreme end of wellness tourism. But as increasing numbers return physically ill, mentally scarred or at the very worst, in a body bag, Kate Graham investigates the dark side of self help***

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLAUDIA & STEFAN/TRUNK ARCHIVE

The soaring sandstone cliffs of Sedona in Arizona are magical. Sometimes, the morning rays hit the towering rock formations at just the right angle and seem to catch fire, flickering from red to ochre, orange to umber.

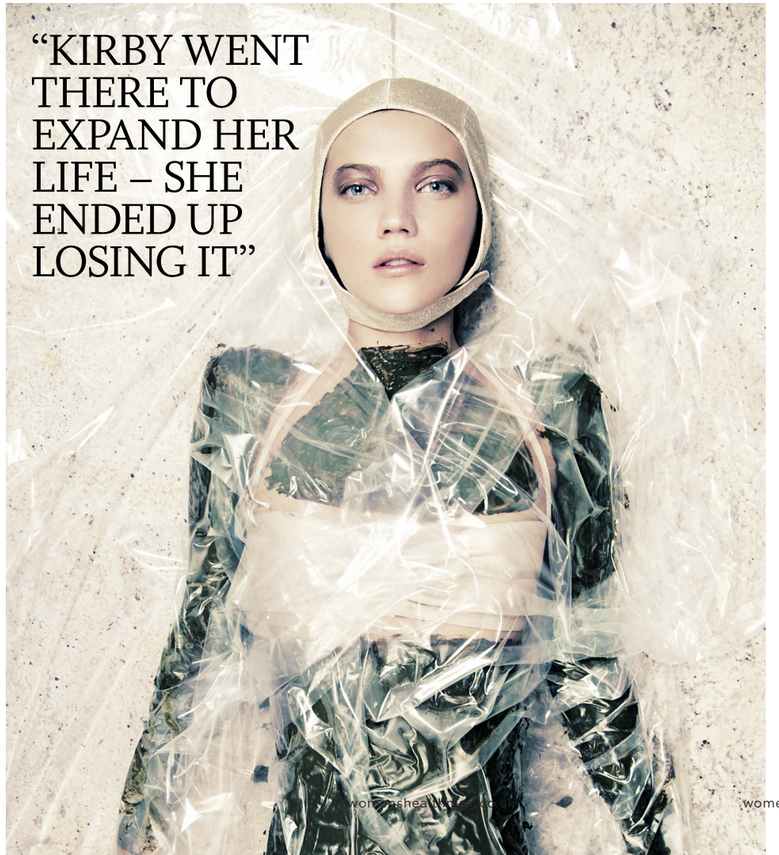
Little wonder, then, that this is America's New Age hub. Every year, thousands of devotees come in search of spiritual enlightenment, lured by the dozens of centres and retreats that have sprung up over the past 10 years. New Yorker Kirby Brown, 38, was one of them. She came for a retreat she thought would unlock her entrepreneurial potential. By the time it was over, 18 people had been hospitalised and three, including Kirby, were dead.

"We called her Hurricane Kirby. She was drunk on life," says her mother, Ginny Brown. An adventurous spirit, she loved to climb, cycle and surf, always grabbing opportunities with both hands. So when Kirby wanted to take her decorative painting business to the next level, she went all in, blowing her £6,000 life savings on a five-day 'Spiritual Warrior' motivational retreat led by the charismatic James Arthur Ray. The millionaire guru promised to help her and more than 50 others "push past their self-imposed borders" to better their lives.

Kirby endured a brutal 36-hour food and drink fast and sleep deprivation. She was even talked into cutting off her hair to prove her dedication. "It was a symbol of leaving the past behind and growing into a new future," says Brown. Finally, in the stifling heat of the Arizona desert, she entered a crowded 'sweat lodge' made of wood, plastic and blankets. As the temperatures soared, people started vomiting, but they were told to stay and push through the pain. An order that proved fatal. "Kirby went there to expand her life," says Brown. "She ended up losing it."

Whenever boom turns to bust, these retreats do well – we tend to turn to 'experts' for certainty in times of recession. What's more, self help has become a serious status symbol in itself. "We've moved on from an 'experience economy', where we paid to be entertained, to a 'purpose economy', paying to find meaning in our lives," explains sociology professor Dr Christine B Whelan. "Showing others we're prioritising our growth is a powerful signal." So much so that a recent study put the UK spend on yoga and spa retreats at £20million per year. Dr Whelan, who has studied the self-help industry, says educated, professional women are often the most oblivious to the risks. "We like to think self help is harmless," she says. "It's not. Remember, if something has the power to transform you for the better, it also has the power to work in reverse."

The attendees of these retreats are as varied as those organising them. Some are vulnerable, searching for closure from a break-up or a bereavement. Others are filling the 'What's it all about?' gap left by the fall in popularity of organised religion. Finally, there is the alpha elite, eager to test their limits – regardless of the physical or financial cost. "They're just the kind of people likely to push themselves, because they know the benefits of hard work and perseverance," says Dr Whelan. "Unethical self-help practitioners play on that enthusiasm and can use it to deadly ends." This means extreme food and drink fasts, sleep deprivation or days of total silence.




"When Kirby committed to something, she committed fully," says Brown. "From what people told me, she had some questions about the way Ray was handling things. But because she'd made such a huge investment, I knew she wouldn't leave. She'd say, 'I'm going to see this through.'"

After the Sedona deaths (James Shore, 40, died upon arrival at hospital. Liz Neuman, 49, passed away after more than a week in a coma), Ray was convicted of three counts of negligent homicide, served two years in prison and is now back in business as a motivational speaker. Brown has dedicated her life to speaking on Kirby's behalf, setting up seeksafely.org to offer advice to attendees. The organisation also asks those running retreats to take the 'Seek Safely Promise', agreeing to a list of principles and practices to keep participants informed and safe. Services such as this are important because, quite frankly, anyone can set up a retreat. While there are qualifications for psychologists and psychiatrists, they can be hard to verify. Anybody can call themselves a therapist, many 'treatments' don't require any regulated training and there's no definitive list of vetted, safe retreats. It's tricky to dispute the claims made in retreat adverts. And it's even harder to search out bad reviews, thanks to the recent 'right to be forgotten' Google ruling that means people can request negative information about them or their business be removed from the internet.

## BOGUS CLAIMS

All of this is made even more difficult when the trip is abroad, run in a foreign language or involves drugs – the current vogue in 'healing' retreats. Taking hallucinogenic plants such as ayahuasca (pronounced a-ya-was-ka) on shamanic retreats is a fashionable and fast-growing slice of the self-help market. Joshua Wickerham, chief adviser to the Ethnobotanical Stewardship Council says tens of thousands of people now travel the 'ayahuasca trail' through South America every year. Ayahuasca, usually taken as a tea, is a hallucinogenic used to bring on visions and its effects can be deadly. In April, 19-year-old British student Henry Miller died in Colombia after drinking it. Its active ingredient, dimethyltryptamine (DMT), is an illegal, Class A drug in the UK and US. Nonetheless, ayahuasca has developed an A-list following. Actress Lindsay Lohan has spoken openly about taking it to help her deal with the "wreckage of her past life".

But at what cost? Ayahuasca is a purgative that causes vomiting and diarrhoea. DMT can also be deadly for those

## RETREAT RED FLAGS

### Six ways to stay safe

**1 Is it a limited time offer?**
Scarcity tactics, (eg 'this is the only time you'll see the guru, sign up now or miss out') are manipulative, says therapist Gillie Jenkinson. Always allow time to think before you book.

**2 Are food and sleep restricted?**
If the retreat won't let you sleep or eat enough you'll become exhausted, vulnerable and less able to evaluate dangers, warns cults expert Ian Haworth. Check the itinerary carefully.

**3 Are the staff being paid?**
Like all of us, retreat staff should be paid properly for their work, says Jenkinson. If you suspect they're not being paid, but the guru seems very wealthy, it's a major warning sign.

**4 Do you have to sign a waiver?**
If so, ask what they're doing to minimise your risk, says Ginny Brown. For example, what happens if there's an accident? If they don't like your questions, don't put yourself in their care.

**5 Is medication allowed?**
You should *never* be asked to stop taking your meds, says shaman Anna Hunt (shamaninstilettos.com). The organisers of retreats should work with your doctor, not against.

**6 Any sudden 'revelations'?**
If one person after another at the retreat starts to 'remember' childhood traumas, be on your guard, says Professor Chris French. It could be a sign of dubious therapy techniques.

with pre-existing heart conditions and can trigger mental health issues. "Ayahuasca puts people in touch with their deep psyches and memories," explains anthropologist Jeremy Narby. "It's possible not to know how vulnerable you are until you take it. By then, it's too late to turn back."

That's something Lucy, a 33-year-old marketing executive, experienced first hand. She went to try Iboga, an African plant with hallucinogenic properties (not a banned substance in the UK) at an underground retreat. "Before I took the drug, I was asked to submit a history detailing my life's emotional events. That included the fact that I was attacked, raped and nearly murdered at 17." The retreat leader's advice shocked her. "He said I should relive the event and during a 'ceremony' I was pushed to do it. It was the most terrifying experience of my life. The visions were more real than actual memories – it was like allowing someone to rape me again."

At first it seemed to help. "I remembered different parts of the attack and saw that I just couldn't have fought back. It helped with my guilt tremendously. I was told I was cured and that nothing bad would ever happen to me again. Three months later I realised I wasn't fixed at all." Violent visions suddenly appeared, she constantly felt people were attacking her. Lucy was referred to a mental health professional and treated for extreme depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Iboga didn't create those issues, she explains, it brought them to the surface. But without proper medical guidance or aftercare she wasn't equipped to cope with the psychological impact. "It opened up a can of worms I wasn't ready to deal with. It very nearly tipped me over the edge."

## DANGEROUS MINDS

Drugs aren't the only risk. Ian Haworth of the Cult Information Centre (cultinformation.org.uk) warns cults are using retreats to lure in vulnerable new members. "They focus on whatever is most popular at the time," he says. "I've been contacted twice this week alone by people who were recruited through yoga." Away from home and surrounded by like-minded people, it's easy to be swayed into questionable ways of thinking. Ian believes a cult can completely control an individual in just three days.

Never assume you're too strong to fall victim, says therapist Gillie Jenkinson (hopevalleycounselling.com). "A cult will create a problem that it then gives an answer to," she says. You go in thinking you're alright, then you start to think you're more messed up than you thought."

Brown believes dangerous psychological tactics were used on her daughter. "The fact is, when your body is deprived of sleep, water and food for a prolonged period of time, your ability to think clearly is disturbed. Your ability to make rational decisions for your own safety is impaired. If Kirby was fooled, then anyone could be."

That was the experience of Becky, a 51-year-old nurse who was sexually assaulted on an ayahuasca retreat in Peru last year. The first night she took the drug the shaman came over and kissed her hand. The second night he went further, putting his hands on her breasts and groin. "The worst part was the fact that I was the only visitor and the only way out was by boat," she says. "But I never once saw a boat at the dock." Feeling trapped, Becky suffered through another two nights. "I played along with his game because I had no other choice. The final night, the shaman yelled at me for not standing up when he told me to. I remember thinking, 'What am I doing here?' At 1:30am I got up, put my passport and money in a ziplock bag, walked to the river and slipped into the water prepared to swim to safety. I wasn't afraid. Survival was my only thought."

After catching the current, Becky swam to a bend in the river where she knew boats would have to slow down. Finally, she managed to flag down a boat and paid its crew to take her to Iquitos, the nearest city. "I got to the airport two hours before the last plane left for Lima [the capital]. I had to pay £300 for a one-way flight, but I didn't care, I would have paid £5,000."

Of course, the majority of wellness retreats are not deliberately manipulative or led by sexual predators or megalomaniacs. They're simply organised by people who aren't sufficiently qualified to know what they're doing. Professor Chris French is an expert in false memories and has seen the damage caused by well-meaning yet misguided therapists. "If they raise the idea of childhood abuse and you say, 'No, that didn't happen,' their reply might be 'denial is natural'. Once you become convinced the memories are there, you start searching for them. A fleeting image or a dream suddenly becomes a memory."

In the wrong hands, even the gentlest of practices, such as meditation, can be damaging. When performer Victoria Maxwell, 47, went on a weekend meditation retreat she didn't know she had an undiagnosed bipolar disorder. The retreat leaders did no mental health screening at all. "I meditated for hours asking, 'Who am I?' over and over. I remember a student looking at the teacher and asking 'Is she okay?' He said, 'She's fine.'" She wasn't. Days later Victoria was committed to a psychiatric ward. She's clear the retreat didn't cause her disorder, but argues meditation is a powerful practice that should be taken seriously by those running retreats.

Clinical psychologist Dr Rachel Andrew agrees. "If people have suffered traumatic events in their past, they often cope by blocking them out. Suddenly having to think about these memories over and over can lead to being re-traumatised. Mental health professionals work slowly and carefully to ensure therapies are helpful, not harmful. Some retreat teachers are simply not qualified or skilled enough to do this properly."

And what if your retreat lasts 10 days instead of two? Teacher Maisie, 34, tried out the now famous Vipassana silent meditation retreats. Her experience was nightmarish. Forbidden from going outside, given very little food and deprived of sleep, she quickly began to feel disorientated. And that was before the leaders turned off her water to keep her 'punctual'. By the fourth day she decided to leave, which was trickier than expected due to exhaustion and confusion. She wasn't alone. "I saw people coming down the stairs like zombies, their eyes blank and their mouths open. They walked so incredibly slowly, their faces completely dead," she says.

Maisie didn't give up on meditation, and has since been on other retreats that she's loved. The key, Brown says, is the way in which those retreats are run. Find one that's organised safely, with qualified experts on hand, and it can be a wonderful experience. "Kirby isn't here, so I say this on her behalf: don't stay away from things, just walk into them with open eyes as well as an open heart." WH

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### Split Farthing Hall, Yorkshire

A homely atmosphere with life coaching, raw food and exercise for a bespoke experience.
Price: From £345 (splitfarthinghall.co.uk)

### 38° North, Ibiza

The idyllic fitness retreat has the tools to get into shape without starvation. Delicious.
Price: £1,122 (thirtyeight degreesnorth.com)

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