

QUEENSLAND

Sharon Stephenson feels like a new woman after a week of serious, undiluted pampering.

I AM an addict, and, like most addicts, I've ignored the signs, such as my inability to go more than a few hours without a hot-chocolate fix, or to pass a cake shop. Come August, my diet is about as nutritionally beneficial as toilet paper, but it's hard to resist comfort food during a nasty Wellington winter.

Not surprisingly, the kilograms I lost over summer are back, and they've brought some friends. When all the pulling, cajoling and tears in the world won't get my jeans to do up, I realise it's time to take action.

The old-school solution is to stop shoving so much food down my gullet and start moving my butt more. However, I need a kick-start, so I head to Australia's Golden Door Health Retreat.

Set in the lush Queensland hinterland, the Golden Door is where you go to recharge, focus on your health and wellbeing, and search for your six pack. It's only three hours from New Zealand, but it could be another planet. Every day, I awake to the chattering of exotic birds and temperatures nudging 25 degrees celsius. Snakes share this area, but are apparently harmless.

Forty-eight of us have signed up for the week, including five Kiwis. Spending so long with this many strangers can be a lottery but, fortunately, I've hit the jackpot: everyone quickly gels and I can't remember the last time I laughed so much when alcohol wasn't involved.

Among the group are lawyers, human-resources managers, personal trainers, engineers, an eye surgeon and even a Melbourne tram driver, all at various ages and stages of fitness and fatness. So, too, do our reasons vary for making the pilgrimage: some have come to recuperate after a trauma, others want to give up smoking, indulge in spa treatments, de-stress or increase their fitness levels.

We assemble at noon on Sunday and it feels a little like the first day of school. We're reminded that coffee, alcohol, meat, sugar and bread are contraband. Being found with any can get us chucked out. Work



Another planet: Set in lush Queensland, the Golden Door Health Retreat is the perfect place to recharge.

Thrilling me softly

is also discouraged: cellphones don't work too well and the palaver of trying to hook up my laptop soon dissuades me from using it. No wonder we all look shell-shocked: we're being stripped of the props and vices that usually fill our days.

They spend a long time at the Golden Door getting to know what you've been putting into your body and what you have or haven't been doing with it. Despite fearing the worst, my individual health assessment comes out above average, but my body-fat percentage is so high it almost gives me vertigo.

Each morning begins at 6.15 with tai chi. It's hard starting the day without caffeine, but the fact we practise this ancient Chinese movement in one of Australia's most beautiful spots helps to lessen the pain. Then it's off to walk bush tracks of varying difficulty, cycle on stationary bikes or ponce about in the pool with a flotation device.

By 8am we're starving, but mounds of tropical fruit, homemade muesli, porridge and yoghurt more than fill the gap. Various herbal teas are gulped throughout the day; by day three, I've almost convinced myself I like them, but many of the caffeine addicts report serious detox headaches.

The rest of our day is filled with workshops, workouts and treatments. The cooking demonstration

from the Golden Door's executive chef draws the week's biggest crowd, not least of all because we get to sample the delicious udon noodles and crab cakes he crafts using no oil or salt. Between bites, pens furiously jot down healthy cooking and eating tips.

Nothing is compulsory — this isn't a boot camp — so it's up to you to make the most of the activities.

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As I've come to shift those stubborn kilograms, my dance card is soon filled with an array of boxing, circuit, spinning and fit ball classes.

Fascinating one-on-one sessions with the resident acupuncturist and naturopath help to banish the evil demons of my lymph system, while yoga and stretch classes have me vowing to return to my once-regular practice. The hour I spend on the reiki couch is, however, one of the week's greatest revelations. The session shows me how important it is to let go of what they called my emotional and spiritual blockages. And for a woman who

thought meditation meant an extra 30 minutes lazing in front of the television, I am amazed that two classes go a long way to overcoming a life-long insomnia habit.

But it's not all serious stuff. I spend hours in the spa, where I am endlessly stoked, sprayed and kneaded. The aptly named Heaven on Earth massage uses more oil than a deep-sea rig, but when I leave in a Buddhist-like trance, my skin is as soft as cashmere.

I don't know how it happens, and I don't really care, but despite all the calories I'm expending, my appetite seems to shrink, and this despite the glorious, mainly vegetarian food that appears in generous quantities every meal time. But as I sit in the sauna each night contemplating my rapidly shrinking navel, I am ridiculously thankful for the opportunity to get my health and lifestyle back on track.

It's now a few weeks since my return, and I'm proud to say that there's more than a touch of the Golden Door about my daily fitness and dietary regime. The best bit of the experience, however, came when my husband collected me at the airport and said those three words beloved by women everywhere: "You've lost weight."

Thank you, Golden Door.

■ Sharon Stephenson was a guest of the Golden Door and Flight Centre.