

Stretch yourself



Need a break from the hustle and bustle of city life? This could be just the thing. Cassy Polimeni joins a yoga retreat at the foot of the Grampians

It's barely 8am when we arrive at Griffins Hill. The grass is still sparkly with dew and spring is beginning to show itself with epic blooms of blossom by the roadside, and new produce making an appearance in the gardens.

Griffins Hill Yoga Retreat is a labour of love dreamed up by internationally-renowned Iyengar yoga teacher Frank Jesse and his partner Jane Gibb, a horticulturalist and vegetarian cook. The pair purchased the property in 2007 after more than 20 years running one of Melbourne's biggest yoga schools in Clifton Hill, and now welcome both locals and visitors – from sheep shearers to stressed-out city slickers – to take part in classes and retreats throughout the year.

We join the long-termers in the kitchen for a cup of tea before class. They're at home here, a mix of locals and imports from Melbourne who have taken up residence for 2-5 day intensives made up of two classes per day, massages, and free play in the surrounding Grampians, all fuelled by wholesome, organic vegetarian fare prepared by Gibbs from produce grown on the property.

It has the potential to be a life-changing experience – or at least a much-needed recalibration – but we enter the studio warily, cautiously eyeing the walls lined with ropes, and shelves of blocks, straps and bolsters, temporarily immune to the stunning vistas of Mt Sturgeon and Mt Abrupt through the studio window, and wondering whether we have what it takes to make it through the two-hour class.

We needn't worry. The class is gentle and thoughtful, taking us slowly and surely through each pose and using the props to assist with greater mobility or support any injuries. Jesse has over 25 years experience teaching yoga, including a stint training with BKS Iyengar – the founding father of this form – at his school in Pune, India, and with his easy-going manner, careful adjustments and colourful instructions (“make your buttocks flat like chapatis!”), the hours fly by.

Before we know it, we're rising from our relaxation pose of legs up the wall and making our way back to the kitchen, simultaneously relaxed and rejuvenated, to sit down with our fellow yogis for a wholesome, organic, vegetarian feast.

The sourdough bread is Jesse's own creation, but almost everything else was lovingly prepared by Gibbs, including millet and sultana porridge, crunchy home-made granola and organic yoghurt, apricot and blackberry jams, a juicy fruit salad, hummus, beetroot and quinoa, and the piece de resistance, Gibbs' savoury spinach, egg and potato tart with turmeric – I can't resist a second helping.

The food fuels an easy conversation between one-dayers and residents. Those staying on negotiate times for a massage or plan hikes that will have them back in time for the afternoon session. We bid them farewell and set forth to tackle our own mission: scaling Mt Sturgeon. Fortified by wholesome food and restorative yoga, we're on top of the world before we've even left the car park at the foot of the mountain. **DA**

NEED TO KNOW

Griffins Hill is located in Dunkeld, three hours west of Melbourne. For more information or to book, visit griffinshill.com.au

Energetic walkers will relish the challenge of Mt Sturgeon or Mt Abrupt. Both walks are around three hours return and offer spectacular views. If you're short on time or energy, Mt Piccaninny is an easy hour and a half return. For more walks, go to visitvictoria.com

Afterwards, reward yourself with a meal at the Royal Mail Hotel, the culinary gem which helped put Dunkeld on the map. This two-hat restaurant has an extensive kitchen garden and one of the world's most impressive wine lists. Keep it simple with a hearty pub meal or splash out with a 5-8 course degustation (royalmail.com.au).