

# The Telegraph

## Gongs, yoga and egg-wielding shamans: Zen awaits at this new Long Island wellness retreat



Just a couple of hours from Manhattan, Shou Sugi Ban House offers welcome refuge from the frenetic pace of modern life CREDIT: FREDRIKA STJARNE

Someone has just shown me a photograph of their pony, Monty, and someone else – who informs me they are a “double Virgo” – wants to know the precise time of my birth so they can create a human design reading for me. We are all on a Weekend Reset retreat in the Hamptons at the freshly minted Shou Sugi Ban House, and it really couldn’t be more... Hamptons.

The aesthetic is what I'd call "lavish modernist barn on sea". Kelly Hoppen goes Zen in Dungeness, if you will. All of the interiors are finished in that shade of white that fashion editors favour for their cashmere winter coats to reinforce the pristine nature of their existence. The in-house cars are wing-doored electric Teslas. The head chef is Mads Refslund (co-founder of Noma) and there's a tea barn with 25 custom blends for you to work your way through during the daily 7am meditative tea ceremony.



There are rambling Japanese-style paths around the property, with the main buildings consisting of light-filled modernist barns CREDIT: FREDRIKA STJARNE

I hate tea and I hate 7am, but over four days at Shou Sugi Ban House a lot of my curmudgeonly cynicism dissolved. On the last morning, I found myself talking to another guest at breakfast about how repugnant the idea of returning to normal life was. Everything about

our time at the house had been serene – even the punishing signature workout with trainer Marian Grigoras felt a universe away from my regular body pump classes in the scruffy NYSC gym on Avenue A. It was glamorous, and personalised. It felt really... Goop (in a good way). I'm happier doing anything if I'm nicely lit and the equipment has appealing typography. I'm also happier – in a very real sense – on a retreat like this than in, say, a beach club in Puglia, although I've had some grand afternoons in the latter.

Like a lot of people in 2019, I'd describe my factory setting as "wired". I spent most of my honeymoon on email, seemingly unable to untether from work, and I spent six years after my mother died Googling precisely what I was about to expire from, going by the nature of the chest pains I was experiencing. I've been in and out of therapy and on and off medication for years with generalised anxiety disorder. It's as à la mode to talk about mental health these days as it is to wear a pair of AirPods, but when you've got anxiety disorder, it makes everything rubbish. Just as having genuine flu stops you from putting one foot in front of the other, anxiety throttles every aspect of your life. It's like having Baby Shark playing on a loop in your head, while actually swimming in shark-infested water.

The idea of a super-exclusive, design-focused retreat, a two-and-a-half-hour bus ride from Manhattan, seems such a good one that I wonder why it hasn't been done before. I know a lot of people with anxiety issues in that catchment area. Although, with just 13 bedrooms and an obviously lavish outlay to create something this beautiful, I wonder how long Shou Sugi Ban House will take to turn a profit. I hope it's a great success.



All the bedrooms are studio spaces with large bathrooms and a small terrace CREDIT: FREDRIKA STJARNE

My experience of retreats has always been positive, and this was one of my best to date – although I would have preferred a little more straightforward guided meditation classes over the yoga. That said, almost every class had a focus on mindfulness, breathing and being present, which are key to quietening the mind and genuinely feeling calm. I particularly liked how everything seemed next-level in sophistication: the sound “bath” used multiple gongs rather than the customary one, sending crashing, vibrating sounds around the room while we lay on the floor with our eyes closed, wrapped in blankets. Similarly, I enjoyed spending time with creative and sound director Jodie Webber, who let me play with her sets of C and G tuning forks to create what is known as the “Perfect Fifth Ratio”, an instantly calming harmonious chime. I was so taken with them, I bought some

for a friend's birthday. The itineraries here have been structured with great consideration. There's plenty of downtime to lay flat on one of the vast sofas in the main barn and read a book, soak in your tub (each suite has either a modern jet bath or a Japanese wooden tub), or swim in the pool.

Design aside, one of the things I found most impressive about the resort is how each member of the team seems cast for their role. The main yogi, Christiana Schelfhout, is as magnetic in personality as she is physically pliable. She studied drama in London, and it shows – she delivers her yoga instructions with the urgency of someone reading the last paragraph of a chapter from a thriller loaded with cliffhangers. Then there's Maggie Harrsen, who performs shamanic healing sessions. This was where the retreat sailed close to the wind of the risible, although personally I'm genuinely intrigued by pagan ritual (I had a pagan wedding and jumped the broom). Harrsen performed an egg cleansing, which involved rubbing an uncooked egg all over me, breaking it into water and analysing the peaks and shapes of the yolk. "You have a lot of shock in you," I was told. Did the egg cleanse me? Was it ritual magic? I don't know, but I was so smitten with Harrsen that by the end of the hour I had told her as much about my life and relationships as I have to anyone I've paid for Gestalt therapy. And I felt really happy about that.



Dining is en famille at a single long table with benches (and outside on some afternoons) CREDIT: FREDRIKA STJARNE

The main revelation for me at Shou Sugi Ban House was the kitchen – which seemed to constantly be in a state of preparation for the next major meal, served en famille. If the retreat opened to non-residents, seats at that communal dining table would be as hot as at Eleven Madison Park. It's some of the best food I've eaten lately, and certainly the most beautifully presented. Refslund's New Nordic style is perfectly at home here, throwing in Japanese umami elements and edible flowers.

I had the perfect baked trout, accompanied by potatoes covered in verdant green ramps and parsley. One evening there was a roasted duck and roasted cauliflower served with cabbage “cups” to create a taco arrangement. The breakfasts, with heavily seeded Danish rye bread, nut butters and miso soup, were the perfect start to each day. I’ve been to retreats where you are effectively starving yourself into submission, but this was different. Nothing felt like a hardship. Life is hard enough. But then, Shou Sugi Ban House is trying to be the ultimate luxury retreat for the 21st century. And it may well have succeeded.

*Shou Sugi Ban House, 337 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, New York 11976, (001 631 500 9049; [shousugibanhouse.com](http://shousugibanhouse.com)). Three-day retreat from \$1,550 (£1,241), including meals and treatments.*

**Read the full expert review: [Shou Sugi Ban House](#)**