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Travel



Simply exquisite: The Grove provides five-star luxury and beautiful surroundings while you take a look at your life

GET A LIFE AT THE GROVE

EVERY time I go away for the weekend, I vow to address my chronic work/life balance. But as soon as I'm back in London – bang! – it feels like I'm taking part in the pentathlon again.

So, offered the chance to do a "best life" retreat run by life coach Nina Grunfeld, I was intrigued.

The carrot is you stay at five-star hotel The Grove, with its exquisite grounds, contemporary artworks and luxury spa. The stick? Well, you have to take a good hard look at your life – and plan some changes – in a group of near-strangers.

I've always been a bit suspicious of life coaches – I'm a therapy girl. But Nina is rather special. Back in 2004 she set up her Life Clubs – self-development groups where people meet weekly to think, write and discuss their hopes and fears. Imagine a reading group with the best elements of group therapy.

The clever thing about the Best Life weekend is that although you must sign up for two workshops (on Saturday and Sunday morning), the rest of the time is free.

If you arrive on Friday night (it's a short cab ride from Watford Junction and Rickmansworth stations, 17 minutes by train from London), you can have cocktails in the library, followed by supper.

The weekend is about making small changes and creating to-do lists. You work in groups of two or three and Nina is a gentle, intuitive

HOTEL REVIEW

THE GROVE
Nr Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire
LIZ HOGGARD

presence – providing structure (if you gossip) and encouragement. Never did I feel pressurised to reveal too much.

She gets us to confront big topics using humour and self-recognition. On Saturday there were 10 of us at a table sketching our "Life Circle" – where we'd like to be in two years' time, and how much space we give to family and friends, sex/love, work, health.

Next we brainstormed a problem with a "buddy" and made a list of everything that gives us pleasure.

Seeing it written down in black and white prompts the awkward question: why aren't you doing more of it? "If you don't want to go to the gym, don't go," Nina advises. "Go dancing instead." And while no one can put "finding a lover" as a goal (too variable), we can aim to be in a place where we're available to new people.

Sunday's workshop is far more concrete – creating real goals. Nina got us to draw a spider diagram of how to climb up individual "legs" to achieve your goal through small, manageable tasks. The best bit? You get to do this in beautiful surroundings.

We stayed in the 16th-century

manor. The decor is boutique country-house hotel – velvet drapes, marble fireplaces.

Individually decorated bedrooms are white and beige with a contemporary take on the four-poster bed, a standalone bath, plasma screen TV and wifi. You feel slightly guilty about all this conspicuous luxury, but Nina believes "light bulb" moments often come when you are doing something – walking in the grounds, cycling or swimming.

The ESPA treatment rooms are the most appealing that I've ever visited – with limestone and oak floors and calming cream walls.

The only fly in the ointment is the restaurant. You're eating in the buffet-style Glasshouse. With dishes from virtually every continent, you can have everything from Thai food to sushi, prawns and salads, and hot dishes such as lemon and thyme pot roast chicken and poached salmon. There's every dessert under the sun (and a chocolate fountain). But after queuing for three meals there, you long for water service.

However, the weekend is inspirational. By Sunday you feel connected to the group. The honesty is humbling. Taboos are broken. There are a few tears; but everyone listens respectfully.

My "buddy" cleverly identified my intimacy issues, so challenged me to go to a restaurant on my own without anything to read.

I'll have to talk to people (oh hell!). But it's a start.

■ **The Grove** (01923 294288, www.thegrove.co.uk), Chandler's Cross, Hertfordshire WD3 4TG. Two-night Best Life Retreats run from 19-21 March and 26-28 March, £480pp (based on two sharing) full board with a one-hour treatment, two Best Life workshops and a copy of Nina Grunfeld's Life Book. For a half bottle of champagne in your room upon arrival, quote Evening Standard when booking.

TRAVEL SEEN

BY JO FERNANDEZ

Sri Panwa (right), an all-villa resort with its own private beach in Phuket, has just opened the Cool Spa in landscaped gardens with waterfalls offering hot and cold plunge pools and yoga on an outdoor spa terrace with stunning views across the Andaman Sea.

Treatments include the expected traditional Thai massage as well as Indian massages and Anti-Oxidant Green Tea massages.

Villas set in 32 acres of coastal forest have private infinity pools wrapped around glass-enclosed rooms with rain showers. Carrier has seven nights from £2,956pp B&B with flights and transfers.

www.carrier.co.uk, www.sripanwa.com



Osciem Black Pearl Masq may look a little like tar but smells of exotic ingredients including ylang, gardenia, pacific saffron and black pearl to deep cleanse and soften dehydrated skin. £65. www.fragrantearth.co.uk



ROUTE NEWS
Virgin Atlantic will be launching a new route from Heathrow to Accra in Ghana on 24 May. The service is set to operate three times a week. www.virginatlantic.com

easyJet starts new daily services from Gatwick to Bordeaux and Stansted to Cagliari on 28 March. www.easyjet.com

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To the manor reborn: lessons in life are better with luxury spa surroundings