

## “Fantastic Days” —The Pursuit of Wellness at an Australian Health Retreat

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I read about The Golden Door in a magazine in Japan. This “health retreat” in the hinterland of the rural Australian “bush” in Queensland offered week-long programs devoted to diet, exercise, wholesome cuisine, and therapies such as massages, wraps and facials, among others. The information I sent for about The Golden Door placed emphasis on personal renewal and wellbeing:

“Each of us needs at some point to take time out from the everyday, to relax, refocus and revitalize the senses. To retreat to a place where tired spirits can be renewed, fresh vigour gathered, and life's balance restored. A place which will truly make a difference to your health and wellbeing.”

This approach seemed to me to be related to my own personal and professional interest in “wellness,” so I decided to go to The Golden Door to find out more about their program.

The health retreat is a 30-minute drive from Surfers Paradise, in 86 hectares of native bushland. I learned that the word “retreat,” which is used as a description both of the resort of what one’s stay there is supposed to be, originally had a religious meaning, of a time of prayer and meditation, usually away from one’s normal life and work.

I stayed at The Golden Door from August 16<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup>. As soon as I arrived, I noticed something that other guests mentioned during my stay, how “delicious” the air was. Every morning I woke up at 6 o’clock, and I did exercises every day. At 6:30am, we did Tai Chi in a small clearing. It was really peaceful and we could hear the birds singing. After that we went for a walk in the forest. I was in the slow group.

Breakfast was at 8 o’clock and we usually had fresh fruit, cereal and yoghurt. We

were told we should eat the fruit to start with and then the cereal and yoghurt.

The table setting was really attractive, with tropical flowers picked from the garden placed around the edge of the buffet table. We gradually got to know one another, eating together, exercising together and chatting. I was a bit surprised at how this happened, because we didn't introduce ourselves to the group formally as we do in Japan. There was no coffee, but there was a coffee substitute and a selection of herbal teas including green tea, which was always available. Water was also available from a dispenser, with slices of orange and lemon nearby on a plate.

The day's program was put on the notice board together with the names of the staff members who were taking charge of each activity. During our stay we could have several different massages: a stress massage, a Swedish massage with oil and a facial massage which also included the shoulders.

On the first day we were weighed and measured. Our fat level was measured, our blood pressure was taken and our heart rate was measured following 3 minutes on a gym bike. The Golden Door has 2 nurses.

Every morning at 9 o'clock there was a stretching class for about 50 minutes. One of these sessions was a yoga class with an Indian woman in a traditional dress which she took off for the exercises. She was wearing gym wear underneath. After that we could play a game of volleyball, "rounders" (like baseball) or some other ball game on the tennis court.

One day we had a cooking seminar when we watched the dietician make some dishes and we also tasted them. They were delicious. Some mornings there was a lecture on a health topic. There were lectures on exercise, stress nutrition, weight management and general well-being. I was very interested in the goal-setting lecture and I am going to buy a book on this topic and do some reading.

During the time I stayed at The Golden Door, I played a lot of tennis and did interesting rope activities, which were optional in the afternoon. I went on the optional forest walk too, and together with guests who had been to The Golden Door before, I

saw a goanna. It was huge. I was very surprised by its size. It was on the ground at first and then it slowly climbed a tree.

Another day, on our forest walk, (which was one of our 1-hour fast-walking, jogging, climbing activities) we saw a wallaby, which is like a kangaroo, but smaller. It stood there looking at us. I hadn't expected to be so lucky to see these wild animals during our exercise activities. The Australians were not surprised because they are used to seeing them. By the way, the Australians seemed really "sporty" and good at playing tennis and doing the other athletic activities.

The second to last day of my stay we did lots of new rope activities. The rope area was near the tennis court. I noticed it while playing tennis and I decided to try the activities. I remember the first time I tried the rope activities, August 20<sup>th</sup>. First we had a warm-up, balancing on a log and walking along it. Then two people had to pass each other half-way along it without falling off. During the rope activities we wore a safety harness in case we fell. The activities were easy at first, but they got harder and harder. For me, even the first one looked easier than it really was. I am not good at "balancing", and you needed to be able to keep your balance. When I had to hang on, my mind would go blank. All the same, it was a fantastic day I will always remember.

I compared balancing on the ropes to one's life, with oneself at the centre, holding on, and the other aspects: family, partner, job, house, the community, and relationships are all related, like the ropes I was holding onto. I had to keep going even though it was hard at the beginning, but life is like that. We had to move in different directions and we needed to stop at times. Just as in life, we had to look ahead, not behind us. This is how we must live our lives. Thinking is important, but actions are more important, I thought.

At night, we would go back to our lodge, using flashlights to see as we walked. There is something spiritual about the night in the Bush. Australians sometimes go there several times a year. I wondered if they had a hard everyday routine, like Japanese people. They come here for time off from work, to relax, and to improve their physical and emotional wellbeing. I found it fascinating to think about their concern for wellness in life.

I plan to go to the Golden Door again, for more research, and for the experience. As the Australians would say, "Life is beautiful," as they breathe the beautiful country air in the Queensland Bush.