



The Pearl WITHIN

Enhance your inner glow with yoga, hiking, nutritious food and the great outdoors Writer Rachael Oakes-Ash

Stressed-out city dwellers are descending upon a boutique retreat in the hills of Orange County for a fitness reboot that addresses the body, mind and spirit.

The Couple

Geo Takoma and Katesha Moskios have been on a yogic journey together for almost 40 years. He was one of the American founders of Power Yoga after a stint in uniform in the Vietnam War, and she the Australian founder of a revolutionary skincare oil, who experienced a horrific car accident that scarred her model face.

Together they are the husband and wife team behind The Pearl Laguna. The intimate week-long retreat in Southern California combines power yoga with vegetarian cuisine and hours of hiking. Up to 14 guests with high-powered careers arrive each week predictably worn down and burnt-out and leave a week later up to 14 pounds lighter with glowing skin and renewed vigour.

Takoma and Moskios clearly know what they are doing. They met in the early 1970s while studying with yoga master Indra Devi and have been together ever since, bonded by a love of healing and nature. Moskios had a background in health and nutrition having studied both in London after winning the Miss Sunshine charity competition in her home town of Perth in Western Australia, and collecting a round-the-world ticket for her fundraising efforts. Meanwhile Takoma took up yoga in 1974 and created his own disciplined yoga combining endurance, flexibility and strength.

Together they opened five studios in different locations across the US before settling in Laguna where Takoma had wannabe yogis

literally lining up down the street to attend his famous classes. The word spread quickly about Takoma's transformative yoga and the results when combined with nutrition and nature on the global retreats he and Moskios held before opening The Pearl Laguna.

The Experience

Today you'll find The Pearl Laguna at the end of a driveway surrounded by oak trees and sycamores and potted succulents amongst private ponds lined with stone buddhas. A rambling mansion boasting 12 bedrooms each with an en-suite and communal areas personally styled by Moskios with her eye for detail. The overall feel is one of exhalation. Guests are here to be nurtured whether they realise it upon arrival or not.

Days are spent in a routine. No need for watches or frocks for dinner. It's barefoot chic and uber casual as guests wake at 6am for hot water steeped with fresh organic lemons before an hour of Takoma's Power Yoga on stunning Tibetan mats woven in cheery hues.

This is where they sweat. A lot – due to body heat created through a powerful set of asanas held for a length of time and slow movements designed to build strength and flexibility. Takoma is an excellent teacher, as a yogi he has taught over 30,000 classes including an eight-year stint as fitness director at The Ashram retreat in California where he taught the likes of Oprah Winfrey.

"We need blood in the brain," says Takoma, who is 67 but looks 47, of inversion poses. "Without blood, our brain can't function properly and we end up senile. We also need strength in our backs and original power yoga poses ensure a long, mobile life."

Vegetarian breakfast is served around a communal table that is styled differently for every single meal throughout the week. It is the details at The Pearl Laguna that count. Details and nutrition as Moskios has designed a menu to cleanse the body of toxins as gently as possible while maintaining fresh flavours.

After breakfast, the group goes hiking with The Pearl Laguna guides. Don't expect a stroll in the park; this is uphill, uphill again, and downhill before uphill again, as hikers criss-cross the trails of the Laguna Canyons set against the Pacific Ocean horizon.

There is a mid-hike snack before more of the same and a return to The Pearl Laguna in time for a fresh juice and either a 30-minute weights session in the gym or a stretching in the pool. And Moskios is always there with her soft gentle voice, uplifting spirit, kind eyes and positive nature clucking around her guests like a mother swan.

Lunch is a relief for many as it signifies the beginning of downtime. "Relaxation is as important for the body as the exercise and food we serve," explains Moskios. "We encourage people to switch off their digital devices, wind down and sleep, nap and relax. I believe we should live our life with beauty in our hearts, and to do that you need to feel beauty within."

Massage is part of the programme with a daily soothing of muscles from some of the best in the business. There's an infrared sauna to help with detoxification, a Jacuzzi, lounge area and plenty of garden nooks with hammocks to lose yourself in. Moskios also



THIS PAGE: Hiking at The Pearl Laguna is a key part of the programme. OPPOSITE PAGE: Nutritious vegetarian meals help cleanse the body of toxins

offers each guest a different facemask each afternoon to soothe the skin.

By early evening it is time for another yoga session, usually restorative in nature. Other evenings Moskios may share her personal story, Takoma could do gemstone chakra healing or a guest lecturer may drop by to speak about holistic health. Dinner starts with communal gratitude for the local produce and finishes, like every meal, with a herbal tea before hitting the hay.

Highlights of the week are sunset qigong on the beach, and on the final day, a hike that finishes on the beach where an al fresco lunch is served. For many though, the biggest thrill is stepping onto the scales on the last day and letting the numbers speak for themselves. Everyone leaves with a smile, many book a return trip or enquire about The Pearl Laguna retreats in Majorca, Spain.

The Body

It's important to distinguish the difference between the mass-market vinyasa-style power yoga also known as 'flow yoga' and linked to Baron Baptiste with the traditional power yoga created by Takoma in 1978.

Takoma's power yoga is designed to both preserve youth and create true power. With a solid yoga foundation thanks to his study with Indra Devi, Vishnudevananda, the Venerable Dharmawara and Muktananda in India, Takoma wanted to create a discipline that ensured endurance through repeated movements at a faster pace, strength through postures held for longer and flexibility through regular practice and elongating asanas.

"Each movement from the feet to the brain places the muscles in balancing positions, and we wash the brain with blood from

inversions," explains Takoma. "Then we get to build endurance and strength and slow down through regular practice to help brighten our mind."

Takoma's mantra is "Good, good, good" which he repeats throughout his personalised class, as he adjusts his students. The beauty of The Pearl Laguna is this one-on-one attention. It is impossible to attend a yoga class with him any other way. His time is dedicated to guests and private clients within the region.

Hiking

Hiking at The Pearl Laguna is an integral part of the programme to get the body moving. After yoga has warmed up the body, loosened and toned muscles, hiking takes care of the rest.

Each hike has been designed to take the guests on a journey from toxic to pure, alongside the detoxifying menu. One thing that is guaranteed is that every hike will get the heart rate up thanks to lots of hills. This improves cardiovascular fitness while lowering blood pressure. Hiking burns up to 370 calories an hour, and when you're doing it for over three hours a day, you can expect to lose weight.

Guests hike in a group that ends up divided naturally by energy levels. Three to five guides accompany the group so there is always one in the front, some in the middle and another at the back. Fitness levels are irrelevant, it's just about putting one foot in front of the other at your own pace.

Being outside in nature lifts the spirits and forms a connection through conversation between guests, providing them with the human interaction the soul both craves and needs. Many become friends before returning home. www.thepearllaguna.com

