

## AUSTRALIA

# Good as gold

**Deborah Telford** tries virtue on for size at Queensland's second-oldest health retreat.

**S**UNDAY. LIKE a cripple, I crawl into Queensland's Golden Door health retreat.

My cunning scheme to quarantine a week off to eat and exercise my way to good health in the run-up to winter isn't shaping up as I'd planned.

An old knee injury has flared up and my lower back is so sore that even bending to put on gym shoes is painful — let alone pounding up and down the steep walking tracks that wind through the foothills of the Gold Coast hinterland where the Golden Door clings to the side of a mountain.

The skies open, the mosquitoes prepare to party and I've started repacking my resort wear — my poolside Plan B squashed by the fear that these unseasonal and drought-breaking rains are probably going to persist all week.

The Golden Door in Willow Vale — about 45 minutes from both Brisbane and Gold Coast airports — opened 16 years ago and is Queensland's second-oldest health retreat.

Unlike its softer, younger sister Elysia in the Hunter Valley and some of the luxury spas that have sprung up in Queensland since, this is the real deal.

With three massages and a facial included in the standard package, it's not quite boot camp. But it is a chance to take time out, eat healthy vegetarian food, swear off addictive substances like alcohol and caffeine and exercise your socks off without the distractions of work, family, TV, emails and cellphone calls.

Aside from the New Age overtones of otherwise excellent treatments and health seminars — spare me the intuitive card reading before my hot stone massage and, no, I'm not convinced balsamic vinegar reduces the glycaemic index of food — this is not one of those dodgy outfits chasing the "detox" dollar by pushing lemon juice diets and colonic irrigation.

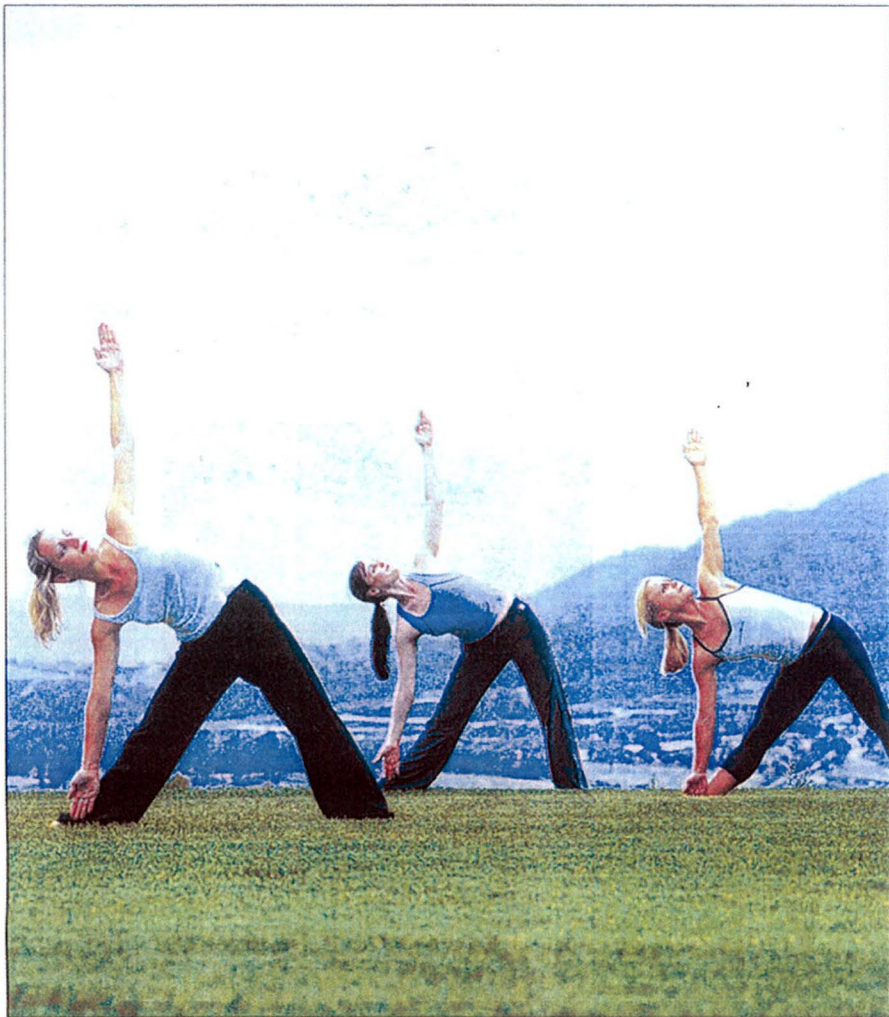
I was half expecting to be surrounded by bored Brisbane housewives, but our 25-strong cohort includes only a few yummy mummies and fitness junkies and seven males.

Four people want to quit smoking. One woman's suffered a stroke. Another is battling serious depression.

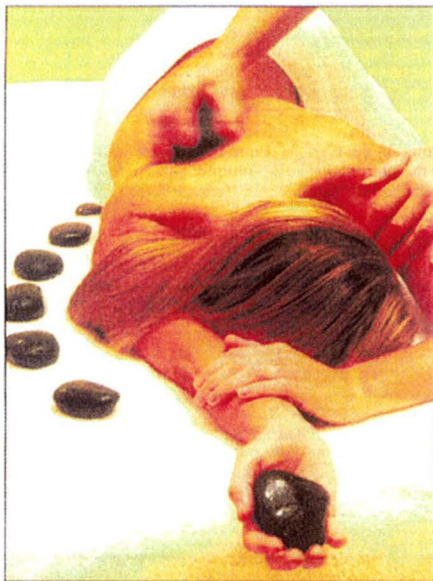
The rest mostly want to kick-start weight loss or take time out from stressful work that ranges from real estate and property development to forklift driving and beauty therapy.

## Monday

Brisbane's three-hour time difference makes my 5.45am wake-up call for tai chi at 6.15 a doddle.



Golden Door is a blend of exertion, relaxation and healthy eating.



Then it's deep-water running. Bobbing up and down in a pool with a flotation belt on sounds easier than the toughest of three morning walks I'd otherwise be up for, based on a fitness assessment which rated my body fat, postural alignment, flexibility, blood pressure and aerobic capacity.

However, I've seriously underestimated how hard it is to imitate a penguin. "Was there a snorkel on the packing list?" says our instructor as we frantically flap straight arms and legs, trying to keep our heads, shoulders and chests out of the water.

A gentle stretch class follows break-

fast, then it's functional fit ball for more core strengthening.

I flag the flow yoga after lunch, flop on my bed with a book and wake up just in time for a seminar on heart disease and cancer followed by a personal training session.

Duncan, my instructor, is reassuringly knowledgeable about the safest way to exercise to avoid exacerbating my injuries. He puts me through the paces, designs three personal programmes for me to take home and, after 50 minutes with him, I'm seriously committed to getting fitter and stronger.

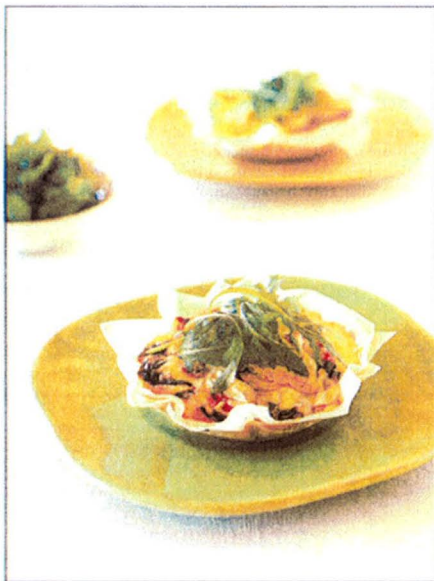
## Tuesday

I make it to tai chi, deep-water running and stretch, as well as a seminar on metabolism and weight loss, but can't muster the energy for boxing or cardio, let alone belly dancing.

Instead, I opt for acupuncture and a private session of Feldenkrais, hoping some tips on improving my posture and gait will help solve my nagging back problem.

## Wednesday

The meat-and-chips boys aren't impressed by the eggplant lasagne, but I think the food is fantastic. So



does the woman who owns two McDonald's franchises. I don't feel hungry and I'm not missing meat, salt, caffeine or dairy products. But after three days of a cleansing diet, buckets of herbal tea and more exercise than usual, I feel more sluggish and achy than when I arrived and rely on anti-inflammatory drugs to get me through tai chi, deep-water running, stretch and a Texas two-step lesson.

## Thursday

Four days of tai chi, deep-water running and stretching are starting to pay off. My knee is much better, I've got the energy for a game of water polo and a spinning class, and all that work on switching on my core muscles makes climbing on to a massage table much easier.

## Friday

My muscles have loosened up, I'm feeling more flexible and in much less pain, so have eased off the anti-inflammatory drugs, but play it safe and opt for penguin practice over hiking up Mt Wongawallan.

I'm booked in for trigger-point massage with a therapist who tells me she's been up since dawn massaging racehorses. It supposedly works by targeting hypersensitive spots in contracted and tight muscles to release the whole muscle and help relieve referred pain. And it's excruciating.

Only the thought of lunch and a lie-down gets me through 50 minutes of agony and I abandon my plans to do a spin/box class. For the next two days the muscles under my ribs are tender, but I've started to feel more balanced and upright.

## Saturday

I sleep like the dead and wake up feeling fighting-fit with no pain apart from those massaged muscles. Six days ago, I struggled up the steep steps and hills of the Golden Door property — now I'm bounding up and down them.

Despite the forecasts, it's been fine all week, but cabin fever is starting to set in with today's heavy rain and I'm ready to go home.

## Sunday

Up in time for a final tai chi session and bush walk before breakfast. As our complimentary shuttle bus pulls up outside Brisbane Airport, a 60-year-old man from our group stands up and says with tears in his eyes that the last seven days have changed his life.

I can't quite claim the same epiphany, but I certainly feel lighter, happier, more relaxed and focused... on finding the best flat white in town.