



Dominion Post
Wednesday 14/01/2015

Page: 12
Section: Life
Region: Wellington, NZ
Circulation: 71708
Type: Metro
Size: 1,780.00 sq.cms.



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CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

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Rehab by the sea

Known as a haven for hippies and sun-lovers, Byron Bay is also a refuge for the rich and famous seeking a cure, writes **Maria Slade**.

IS THE Sanctuary an expert rehabilitation facility working miracles with people who have run out of options, or is it a thinly disguised luxury getaway for the obscenely wealthy?

It's a question I ponder as I check in to Australasia's most expensive rehab centre, in the northern New South Wales holiday town of Byron Bay.

I do not have substance abuse issues, other than the "I'm never drinking again" feeling after a night out on the chardonnay. I'm here to get a glimpse of how the rich and famous deal with their demons, and to understand what A\$135,000 (NZ\$151,000) for a month's treatment buys you.

The Sanctuary isn't actually a place, unless you count its administrative offices and extensive warehouse, storing everything from art supplies to surfboards. It is a bespoke programme using both mainstream and alternative medicines to treat a maximum of six clients at a time.

These people never meet each other; rather they are cared for by a small army of staff in individual luxury homes around the Byron shire.

Aside from medical care, the

services include a personal chef and driver, a 24-hour caregiver, alternative therapies such as shiatsu massage and yoga, and outings. Byron Bay's kayaking with dolphins excursions are a popular choice. There are about 40 houses in the area which The Sanctuary uses. It's done this way for confidentiality reasons, but also to provide normality for clients, says founder Michael Goldberg.

The identities of the rehab's privileged clientele are absolutely never revealed, but Goldberg will say they include "some very prominent people".

There have been reports of singer George Michael checking in for two months and paparazzi pictures of supermodel Naomi Campbell on the beach.

The clinic also gets a "fair few New Zealand clients – there isn't much in New Zealand", he says. "[Here] they can actually not be this famous person, they can just be a human being who needs a little bit of help. That's what they love about us."

There is no doubt that those visiting The Sanctuary – or at least their families – are extremely wealthy.

"I had one client who said, 'can I bring my submersible, I

near the reef over there is really nice'," Goldberg says.

THE SORT OF THERAPY MONEY BUYS

Each client is referred to by a codename for the duration of their stay, and I note mine on the file opened on me.

We drive to the undisclosed location where I am to reside for the next two days – a spacious Balinese-style beachfront property, with a master bedroom opening out to the ocean and a large ensuite replete with luxury beauty products.

I'm given my schedule. The first appointment is acupuncture with Roi. I've never had acupuncture, so I'm full of curiosity. What can he tell about the state of my health? Why does the needle corresponding to my liver hurt? Hmm, Roi murmurs.

There is much talk about energy flows.

A later shiatsu session with Tracy raises more questions about the liver which, after a glance at my tongue, she pronounces as "slightly stagnant". Too much of the aforementioned chardonnay? No-one's willing to commit



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themselves.

As Roi sticks needles into me, my personal chef, Scott, prepares dinner – grilled salmon on noodles with wakame (seaweed) and mange tout, with a surprisingly tasty cocoa-free, sugar-free chocolate slice for dessert.

He also fills the fridge with healthy snacks for the next day – cucumber rings with goat's cheese, guacamole and vegetable sticks, a platter of berries – and leaves me as much fruit to juice for breakfast as I would eat in a normal fortnight.

Everything is organic and a lot grown by The Sanctuary at its gardens a few kilometres out of town.

Each morning the chefs place orders by smartphone for what they need. Dairy products are used sparingly, while sugar and all stimulants are banned – even chilli.

Scott is good company and chats about the clients' bizarre eating habits. These are people whose lives are seriously out of whack, and it extends to their diets.

It's not just the anorexics who'll hide food in the hems of the curtains. Often Americans arrive stating they "don't eat vegetables".

One young South American man who'd been waited on his whole life was fascinated to watch Scott make soup: he hadn't realised it could be made from scratch.

The Sanctuary is about teaching people how to live a balanced life, and eating healthily is a key part of that, the chef says.

WHEN ALL ELSE HAS FAILED, THERE'S HOPE HERE

Goldberg knows about recovery firsthand. He is a former heroin addict who kicked his habit after spending two months in a Byron Bay therapeutic community.

He had smoked pot at school and done a lot of cocaine without disastrous effect, but "I knew I was addicted to heroin the first

week. The heroin was like, 'I need it, I feel sick'."

He stopped using many times. Finally he realised he needed to go away, so he sold his building business and moved north.

Although Goldberg was grateful to the therapeutic community and went back there to work after he got clean, he was used to a nicer lifestyle.

He also believed rehab should offer one-on-one treatment and delve into the underlying reasons for the addiction, not to mention offer organic food.

The answer was to set up his own programme, and The Sanctuary opened in 2003. The resources behind its six-person programme are staggering. It employs 120 staff, around half of them full time. Its IT requirements are kept in-house to guard against hacking.

The warehouse has to be seen to be believed – practically any household effect you could think of is available, from board games to bikes. All of the linen is monogrammed with an "S"; even the yoga mats have the Sanctuary brand on them.

Each client is assigned a personal manager to liaise with the clinicians, and the team of practitioners meets twice a week to discuss every aspect of the client's wellbeing.

"Even if the client wants to drink a Diet Coke, it's a therapeutic issue," Goldberg says. "Does the naturopath need to go in there and explain what's in it, what it does?"

Goldberg claims a 90 per cent success rate, and no-one ever complains about the price, he says.

In answer to criticism that he's merely pandering to the mega-wealthy, he says he's had clients who've detoxed 15 times previously. "We help a lot of people."

These folk are often in Last Chance Saloon, clinical director Jane Williams explains. "You have to have tried other things.

This is like heavy intervention."

If people have to sell their house or cash in their superannuation to come she will refer them somewhere else, because the pressure they'd be putting themselves under would not aid recovery, she says.

Most people come ambivalently. "No-one comes to treatment that I know of and says, 'I've had an epiphany'. Normally the family has said, 'we've had enough', or they're no longer functioning at work, but they don't necessarily want to give it up; it's just that they don't want to lose the other things," Williams says.

"Sometimes it's "trust fund babies" sent by their parents, because they have to meet certain performance criteria to keep the trust fund going, she says.

The Sanctuary treats a wide range of problems, not only drug and alcohol abuse but also gambling addictions, eating disorders and depression.

Addiction to prescription medicines is a major issue. "We don't have a population group we fill out," Williams says. "I asked one client from Colombia how he dealt with anger. 'I shoot them', he said."

Aside from the affordability question, the only other reasons the facility wouldn't take people is if they don't recognise they have a problem, or if they have severe psychosis requiring hospital intervention.

REHAB IS GOOD BUSINESS

Goldberg has two other addiction treatment ventures – Recovery House, The Sanctuary's only group therapy offering, where five detoxed clients live and learn how to cope with a sober life; and Interventions Australia, a service he likes to describe as "family communication".

"Eighty-five per cent of the time, an intervention doesn't need to happen. People need to learn how to speak to that person," he says.



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“Everyone just wants the money,” he comments, “and, for me, it’s like you provide the service, you give people what they want, and the rest will come.”

As he drives us in his late-model SUV to look at The Sanctuary farm, the subject of cost comes up again. A story which appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last year did not go down well. After two days in the rehab programme the journalist concluded that spending that much money on an exotic holiday would probably have the same effect.

A four-week stay at The Sanctuary is about the same price as the car we are in, and what value do you put on a life, Goldberg asks?

To my mind, it is possible to detox without monogrammed yoga mats and luxury bath products. I’m also yet to discover what the implications of a slightly stagnant liver are.

However, I think that The Sanctuary staff many of them former addicts – obviously care, and rich people are human beings, too. If this is what they feel they need, and they can afford it, why not?

■ The writer travelled courtesy of VIA Byron and The Sanctuary.

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Fact file

I Getting there: Virgin Australia has daily flights to the Gold Coast. See virginaustralia.com/nz/en

I Staying there: People suffering from drug and alcohol addiction, eating disorders and other problems stay at The Sanctuary for varying lengths of time. A basic four-week stay costs about A\$135,000.

I Being there: As part of their treatment, clients do activities such as trips to the Byron Bay farmers’ markets, and kayaking with dolphins, capebyronkayaks.com, visitbyronbay.com

I More information: sanctuarybb.com



Last-chance saloon: The Sanctuary founder Michael Goldberg and therapist Tamara Green.
Photo: ADAM WARD



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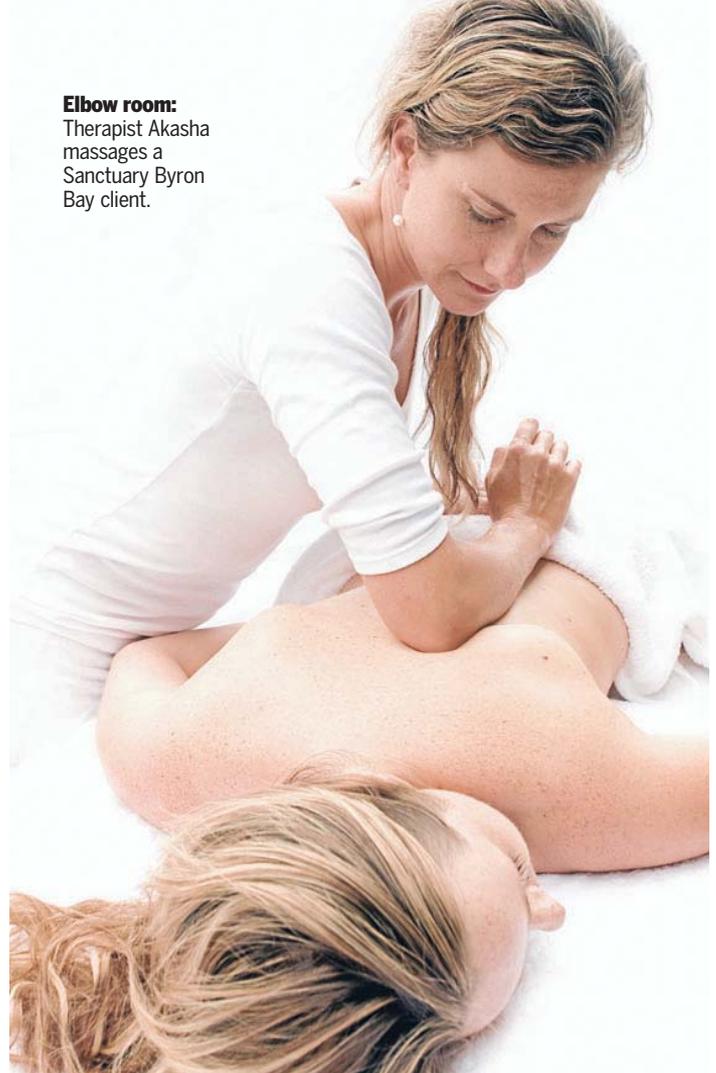


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Sunny retreat:
Byron Bay's
iconic lighthouse.



Elbow room:
Therapist Akasha
massages a
Sanctuary Byron
Bay client.



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Healthy option: Each guest has a personal chef who prepares organic meals free of all stimulants – even chilli.

