Isn’t it uncanny how things always happen for a reason? At the end of January, I received an invite from Kiwi yogi Claire Robbie and her partner, Californian lifestyle coach Luke Sniewski, to attend a week of wellness, courtesy of their company Jack & Olive Retreats, in Queenstown. A quick peek at the itinerary and I was sold: yoga, strength workouts, outdoorsy pursuits, fine dining, scenic explorations and wine tasting excursions – I mean, really, what’s not to like? What’s not to like was the silly little voice in my head. Because it was a last-minute thing, I was fretting the way your typical modern-day chick frets about everything including not being able to re-organise my already chocker pre-arranged schedule for that week in time (feeling out of breath just writing this), so I nearly cancelled. In which case, I would have missed out on the priceless opportunity of being given a set of tools that now enable me to maintain a healthy, balanced lifestyle in a fast-paced, cyber-fanatic, anxiety-ridden world that’s anything but conducive to living well.

To explain the meaningful effect this experience has had on me, I invite you to relive my journey…

DAY 1: The arrival, the people and a bit of calming yin
I arrive in picture-perfect Queenstown early on a summery Monday afternoon. Sun’s out, not a cloud in the sky – the scene of a fairytale waiting to happen. My residence for the week, a stylish two-suite, two-bathroom luxury apartment at The Rees Hotel, isn’t too shabby either, especially if you factor in the 180-degree vistas of majestic Lake Wakatipu straight from the master bedroom! We start our sojourn with a group intro later that afternoon. There are ten of us, including hosts Luke and Claire, all in our late 20s to mid 40s. We’re a colourful bunch, half American, half Kiwi, which makes for an eclectic dynamic.

First up, there’s my ‘roomie’ Seth, a jet-setting Californian CEO with a 24/7 schedule, who’s in dire need of some R&R (and extreme adventure, as it turns out). Also all the way from the US of A are David, one of Luke’s former clients and success stories (he lost 100 pounds in less than six months) as well as Seattle couple Mira, a bubbly photo journalist, and her partner, Kevin, who’s a chef. Finally, making up the Kiwi contingent, there are Rebecca, Helen and I – all scribblers by trade.

During our group intro Luke and Claire give us a brief overview of what we can expect from the retreat. “It’s not a detox, or about following a strict regime or depriving yourself,” Claire explains. “It’s about making small positive, sustainable changes in your life while still being able to enjoy yourself.”

To get the ball rolling, the pair subtly encourages us to set ourselves small personal nutritional and fitness goals for the week, whether it’s participating in every yoga class on the itinerary, drinking no coffee or eating until we’re 80 percent full. This, as Luke explains, is all part of the bigger game plan: he and Claire will provide plenty of guidance for us on how to live well; the aim is for us to take whatever works for us personally from this experience, and incorporate it into our lives.

When it comes to my personal wellbeing, there’s typically room for improvement. As a habitual scoff, portion control is a biggie, so I’m definitely going to give the 80 percent full option a go. Having been brought up to finish every last
morsel on my plate, this turns out to be easier said than done initially, but by taking small mouthfuls and chewing each 30 times (another of Luke’s helpful hints), the concept slowly eases its way into my consciousness as the days go by.

Another goal I’m hoping to achieve with Claire and Luke’s help is to find ways to effectively incorporate fat-burning (high-intensity) exercise into my routine in order to tone up the saggy bits. Lastly, I could really do with some serious help in shutting up negative self-talk, and staying calm and collected in stressful, emotionally overwhelming situations!

Turns out there’s no better remedy for calming the mind than a yin yoga class Claire styles (our first group exercise that afternoon). “It’s a great way to learn how to get in tune with your own body, and just be with yourself and your thoughts,” Claire explains as she guides us through a series of slow, prolonged poses. Some of these are ultimately relaxing, like the forward fold, while others are uncomfortable, like super long low lunge holds.

This discomfort causes quite a bit of fidgeting among the group, but Claire advises us to breathe through the pain.

Jack & Olive Retreats is the brainchild of yogi and former Nightline TV reporter Claire Robbie, who named the company after her grandparents. Claire got into yoga eight years ago, after she’d injured her patella tendon in her left leg and doctors told her she’d never regain full function of that limb ever again. “I started doing Bikram and loved it,” remembers Claire (whose leg, by the way, then regained full function in no time).

Whilst living in the yoga mecca of Santa Monica, California, she was introduced to power and vinyasa yoga, completed her teacher training and began teaching friends privately. It was then that Claire came up with the idea to run retreats where people could sample various yoga styles, taught by some of America’s best yogis.

Wanting to make the retreats more holistic than just focusing on yoga, Claire began looking for a nutritionist to bring on board when she came across lifestyle coach Luke Sniewski and his company LEAF Lifestyle (LEAF is an acronym for Longevity, Energy, Athleticism and Function).

You’ll be hard-pressed to find someone who is as passionate as Luke about empowering people to live well and who, at the young age of 29, has such a remarkable knowledge and an extensive repertoire of qualifications (Luke is a PT, Certified Neuromuscular Therapist and has a Masters of Science in Sustainable Food Systems).

Instantly drawn to Luke for more than his credentials, Claire took three days to pluck up her courage and ask him out on a date. And the rest, as they say, is history. A good move on her behalf, too, because the couple complement each other to a tee, with Claire bringing the calm, mindful, yogic side to the table and Luke the more edgy training nous and nutritional experience. As Luke succinctly puts it: “My fitness practice transformed her body, and her yoga practice transformed my mind.”

To find out more, go to www.jackandoliveretreats.com and www.leaflifestyle.com
“It’s when you think you can’t do it anymore that the ‘yoga happens’ and those nasty tight areas release. It’s all about surrender, letting go and opening your hips. Your body will thank you for it – and you won’t need a hip replacement later in life!”

Gotta love Claire’s quirky humour as much as her thought-provoking little quotes. Case in point: “You can survive for weeks without food, days without drinking, but only a couple of minutes without breathing.”

**DAY 2: From lower extremities to healthy living principles**

After a good night’s kip following our therapeutic yin induction, we start the next day with a dynamic power yoga session (a rude awakening for those of us who tend to be grumpelstilskins first thing in the morning). First, Claire warms us up with series of sun salutes, followed by 90 minutes of sweaty vinyasas (flowing postures). These certainly do their bit in waking up the body, whilst also leaving the mind pleasantly relaxed.

The yoga, it turns out, is only the entrée to a very physical day to be spent in a mountain bike saddle. For two-and-a-half-odd hours we meander through the quaint township of Arrowtown, along the scenic outskirts of QTown, over wonky bridges and around gravelly corners that intermittently have me, a self-acclaimed mountain biking wuss, hyperventilating. But thanks to the foolproof instructions of our (very patient) guide Steve, even I make it to the finish line, at the famous AJ Hackett bungy jumping bridge.

As muscle soreness threatens to set in after all that pedalling, Luke’s lower body restorative class is just what the doctor ordered. Using tennis balls (or harder lacrosse balls for a more ‘hard-core’ option), we start by rolling the ball around under the balls of our feet, finding tight spots and releasing them whilst deeply breathing into it, then working our way up our calves, quads, glutes and lower back. Ouch all right, but the relief you feel once you’ve unwound those tight bits far outweighs the pain, plus it sets you up for a pain- and injury-free start to future physical activities.

That night, our physical efforts of the day are rewarded with a scrumptious Kiwi BBQ at the Rees, complete with foil baked salmon, wholesome hot and cold salads, and arguably the world’s best salted caramel chocolates (what makes them extra special is that Kevin made them himself). In a double whammy move, Luke uses the opportunity to bring us up to speed with the six healthy living principles, which he believes are the key to optimum health, vitality and happiness.

These principles include:

- Eating real food (as unprocessed and close to nature as possible, as food is the medicine and the essence of health)
- Daily movement – our bodies are designed to move, if we don’t, it will lose the ability to function
- Rest and relaxation – to balance modern-day stress
Lifelong learning – stimulating your brain power by learning a new language, travelling, taking up a new hobby…

Community – spending time with other people and immersing yourself in nature

Love – health is an expression of how much you love and treasure yourself. If you don’t love yourself, you will fall back into bad habits.

The important thing to remember, Luke reiterates, is that there is not one single way of living healthily that's right or wrong: “You have to experiment on yourself and find what works for you, while remaining open-minded to other schools of thought. It is this diversity of lifestyle that makes the world a beautiful place worth celebrating.”

To help us implement these principles, Luke suggests getting into the daily habit of practising ‘the four Ms’ – Meditation, Motivation, Movement and Mapping. Meditation can involve simply sitting in a quiet space and taking 10 slow breaths, whilst listening to an audio by a motivational speaker like Tony Robbins may set you up for a positive mind set during the day. Movement includes any form of exercise, both structured and incidental (think walking to the dairy instead of driving).

The fourth component, Mapping, involves writing your to do list for the day; it’s what helps us manage and balance life. “The trick is to spread your to do’s around the six healthy principles,” Luke says. “Don’t just make up a list of all your work commitments, for example; rather prioritise spending time with your loved ones, taking some ‘me time’ and factoring in movement on a daily basis.”

Day 3: Move, indulge, meditate

Speaking of movement, Day 3 starts with a workout à la Luke in the idyllic Frankton Gardens (one of many reminders on this trip of how good it feels to immerse yourself in nature). The session involves an active warm-up to loosen our limbs, followed by a short but intense burst of high-intensity interval training, which is proven to continue burning fat for hours post workout.

The session includes exercises like jumping squats and lunges, press-ups and shuttle runs, which have us puffing like steam engines in no time. That’s everyone except for Seth who, in all of his 6 foot 6 glory, flies backwards into a hedge instead, as a pre-meditated form of entertainment. Twenty-five minutes on we are (literally) done and happily in the know that we’ll still be burning off fat deposits for hours to come.

Just as well, because today is a day to indulge a little. It’s also the day my ‘other’ goal for the week (to drink no wine) tragically goes out the window. In fact, it’s a good intention that proves to be an epic fail for most of us – blame the wonderful Central Otago offerings we encounter on our jolly tour of four wineries, including Peregrine and Akarua whose knockout Rieslings and Rosés are simply too heavenly to pass up. Almost as heavenly as having Claire lull us into a state of peace and tranquility at that evening’s guided meditation. Purr…

Days 4 to 6: Living the life

The next three days involve a balanced mix of yoga, HIIT training, R&R, and sensory exposure to various culinary delights (including a degustation dessert at the Rees featuring crystallised gorse flower and pine needle ice-cream that would make Heston green with envy).

Plus there’s much outdoorsy fun to be had – from an exhilarating jet boat ride (loving those 360s!) and a crazy tandem ‘funyaking’ expedition that ends with us all taking the plunge into the icy but crystal clear and refreshing waters of the Dart River, to a guided hike through the forest up Te Tapanui, magically overlooking the entire Queenstown region.
Day 7: Sunday fun day

Today's the day for the adrenaline junkies amongst us to get their thrill-seeking kicks, whether that's Mira and Rebecca paragliding off the mountain, David skydiving, Luke jumping off bridges or Seth learning how to land a plane and tackling New Zealand's most terrifying bungy, the Nevis, with its 134-metre drop.

Rather than actively participating, Claire (at the time eight months pregnant) and I decide to vicariously live 'life on the edge' through Seth, by acting as his Nevis support crew. Little do we know that we, too, will be harnessed and suspended high up in the air, in a tiny wee pod and travel across to the bungy platform. Nothing like the Nevis to make you conquer your fear of heights! Unlike Seth, who, when I ask him whether he was scared pre-jump, nonchalantly tells me: “I’ve never felt in the present as much as I did when I stood on that platform.”

The final verdict

What I loved about this retreat is that it struck a perfect balance between nurturing your yin (our calm feminine side) and yang (your energetic, fiery, masculine selves). In no small part we have our hosts to thank for creating this equilibrium – Claire, whose vinyasa and restorative yoga classes were strength building, mentally challenging, emotionally liberating and relaxing all at once, while Luke’s incredible knowledge of nutrition and the workings of the body, combined with his training and pre- and post-workout sessions put us well and truly on the path to achieving a strong, pain-free body and a healthy, happy mind.

Armed with an abundance of useful resources, we can now, little by little, change bad habits into positive habits and so make the challenges of our daily lives more manageable.

The new ‘me’

My new coping mechanism (rather than reaching for the nearest wine bottle when a crisis hits), is to religiously practise the four Ms. Every morning first thing, I do a meditation that’s in line with what I want to achieve that day (if I need to write an article, for example, I’ll do one that’s creativity focused). This stills my mind, sets me up for the day in a positive way, and usually takes care of M number two (motivation) as well.

Once I’ve had a cleansing hot lemon drink and high-protein breakfast for sustained nourishment, I take my mutts for their morning blast at the beach, and make sure I incorporate some form of challenging movement (a short sharp workout, boxing class or power yoga) into my mornings and a more calming activity in the afternoon, such as a yin class or stretch. These movement combos, I find, keep me energised and calm when needed, emotionally freed up, and physically intact.

As for the mapping, I write a to do list the day before, and prioritise about three or four things that I absolutely have to get done, with some ‘optionals’ at the bottom of the list (so I don’t get freaked out if I don’t fit them in!) In addition, I’m staunchly persisting with my 80 percent full policy and chewing every bite slowly comes to me as automatically now as it does driving the car. It’s amazing how a small change like this can have such a huge impact on how your clothes fit and how good you feel!

Finally, I found this retreat experience intensely liberating on an inter-personal level. Driven by a chronic lack of energy (blame adrenal fatigue), coupled with some emotionally draining events over the past few years, I’d sub-consciously gotten into the habit of keeping to myself and shunning social situations. Spending this time with like-minded, witty, intelligent, passionate and genuine people, reminded me that life is way too short to be a hermit and to ‘just hang in there’. As a result, I’ve got my mojo back and am falling in love with life all over again.