

THE MIDDLE WAY

Can a retreat in rural Dorset leave a busy journalist feeling calm and serene?

Ian McCann investigates the case for Middle Piccadilly...

There is an insistent thudding. It might be the drum being beaten over me. It might be my heart pounding. But the sound is everywhere, an unavoidable

noise that picks me up and carries me away to a place I wasn't sure existed. I'm still not sure if that place is real or if it's just put me into a trance. Either way, my surroundings, a pleasantly decorated therapy room in an attractive former barn, have melted away.

Thud, thud, thud. The air is full of mountain sage, a sweet pungent smoke wafted around you to purify your body – and perhaps your soul. Maya, the therapist, is singing now, humming, then whistling, then speaking. Her voice sounds deep, then light. She moves around, the beating drum above my feet, my hips, my chest, my head. It's close enough to feel the pulse of air from its vibration, but it's not deafening. Its constant mesmerising rhythm is at the heart of the treatment; here's a ritual our ancient ancestors would have recognised and which you can still plug into should you be open to it.

Lying on the therapy table, I feel both vulnerable and empowered, an energy coursing through me that makes it difficult not to twitch and wriggle. A certain generation who were drawn to a sense

of unity with the universe through very different means will recognise this sense of absorption in sound: the last time I felt like this was in the early 90s in a giant tent outside Ayr, Scotland. But while the feeling may have parallels with the rave scene, the intention and outcome is altogether different here.

Shamanic healing

I can't say I was expecting this kind of experience at a retreat in rural Dorset. Middle Piccadilly is not that far away from seaside resorts and Sandbanks, the enclave where footballers and movie stars settle, the fourth-most expensive area in the world. But right now, we could be anywhere – and nowhere.

It had all seemed so different at the start of the shamanic healing session. I wasn't cynical, but I had few preconceptions; I hadn't anticipated feeling so involved, because I haven't felt that involved when I've meditated, or had hypnosis, or been to a church service. I do think of myself as spiritual, as I told Maya when she enquired gently at the start of the session, seeking a gateway to my belief system. I said that I don't believe in an all-powerful being, but that I do think everything in the universe is connected. Here was something Maya could tune into.



Finding your own path

Was she able to tune into it! Over the course of what I imagine to be about 20 minutes, but which might have been hours or seconds as far as I was concerned, Maya built the ritual up to a crescendo of sound and feeling.

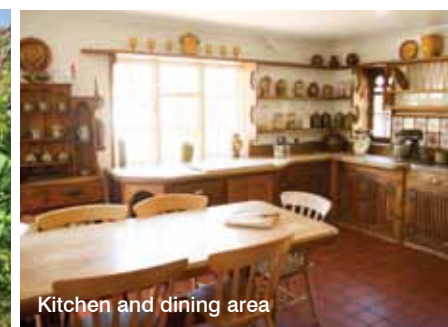
But it was not a crescendo; merely a plateau. There was a hiatus. Nothing much seemed to be happening. It was quiet enough for me to become aware of a shortness of breath and pounding of my heart. 'Was this it?' I wondered. Maya appeared agitated, and looked wilder, like someone who'd had a workout, which I suppose she had. Her voice sounded hoarse when she spoke, as well it might, with all the use it had been put to. 'Do you feel sick?' she asked. 'I feel sick.'

I did a bit. I'd put it down to nervousness – it's not every day that someone beats a drum over your prone body – or the fact that a lot of adrenalin had been generated that I couldn't put to use. Maya had other ideas. She felt a *presence*, and feeling queasy was her sign that it was there. And it was in me and needed to be released; not just for my benefit, but for its own.

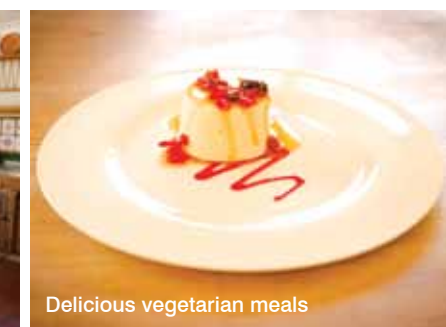
Do I believe in such entities? Not really. I think the things that definitely exist in the world are amazing enough, why seek out a whatever-it-is that may or may not be there? But there is no point in experiencing a ritual



Therapy rooms



Kitchen and dining area



Delicious vegetarian meals

like this if you won't give yourself to it, so when Maya asked if I would be willing to try to set the whatever-it-is free, I agreed. Mountain sage burned again, and spirits from the four corners of the globe and beyond were called to assist.

Maya asked what the whatever-it-is felt like, and I was surprised to hear my voice cracked like hers when I said it felt like a hot molten glow across my shoulders. Maya spoke to it, and my voice supplied the answers. What was it called? 'Ask,' replied the glow, another surprise. Ask was then asked what it was doing in me, for which it had no answer, but it was happy to be told that it needed to leave me and join the other whatever-they-ares of its own kind rather than burdening me. And so, somehow, Ask was drawn out of my body to join its fellow hot glows elsewhere in the universe. The atmosphere in the room unwound perceptibly; the shamanic healing was over.

Ritual and ceremony

Maya looked like she'd been through a demanding experience too: this is not a one-way street, she is fully involved. Now she appeared sheepish and quiet. As for me, I felt slightly at a loss now the room was silent again. You could liken it to when you'd had noisy sex and were now brewing a cuppa, or when you'd emerged from seeing a powerful movie and gone out blinking into the mundane world. But those are only vague comparisons. In truth the session was like nothing I'd experienced.

From the outside, it would doubtless have looked ridiculous; a middle-aged man lying on a table while someone banged a drum, whistled and wailed over him, but it felt utterly natural. Human society was formed amid such rituals and still performs them, albeit in a more repressed way. Rituals affect you, whether in a church, temple or a stadium, and shamanic healing offers the opportunity to connect with a sense of the wider universe and the spiritual dimension. The fact that the session – ceremony? – was carried out on a one-to-

one basis helped to make it more intense than other rituals I've experienced.


Intense and effective. Did Ask exist? Did the spirits really participate? I don't know. What I do know is that once I had calmed down again, I felt better and that I'd experienced something I could somehow connect with.

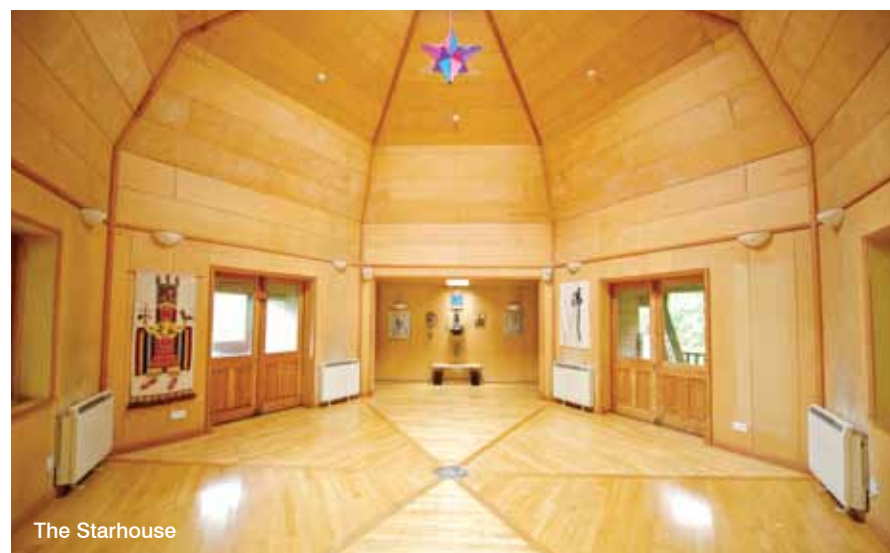
It's easy to feel calm at Middle Piccadilly. It's not exactly a spa, although there are numerous spa treatments available, such as a green tea body wrap, organic facial, and body scrubs. There's a sauna and a plunge bath. A full-board stay includes *cordón vert* vegetarian meals created by the senior partner, Dominic, which are simple, healthy and delicious.

You can come for a detox, or a raw food package, or opt for an emergence retreat designed to help you deal with a crisis. The buildings are attractive and rural-looking, if not rustic, and the accommodation comfortable without being unnecessarily luxurious. It's not a hotel, it's a retreat centre: you are encouraged to disconnect from the world, although it is possible to go online in some rooms. The luxury offered here isn't so much the countryside and the garden and the spa, but the opportunity to reconnect to yourself and the real world, casting off the habits and the chaos that's so much a part of modern life. While Dominic and Lisa Harvey run the place as

a business, the business provides for your physical and spiritual requirements, and they do this very well, either unobtrusively or hands-on depending on need. During my stay at Middle Piccadilly, a Shamanka training course for women is going on at the Starhouse, a hexagonal structure decorated with images of deities, led by Eliana Harvey, the 82-year-old founder who still leads numerous courses here and is full of vitality. The level four students are friendly, clearly delighted to be here, and share their smudging ritual – that cleansing burning of mountain sage.

When Middle Piccadilly plans a stay for you, shamanic healing, if you want it, is recommended as the first treatment, to give you time to absorb the experience afterwards. The following day, Claire gave me a Spiezia Hand On Heart massage, which is a deeply relaxing and gentle treatment designed to rebalance the chakras. The final event of a three-night stay was an excellent massage from Maya.

Spiritual or relaxing? Either way there is a special energy about Middle Piccadilly. Eliana ascribes it to the fact it's sited on a meeting of ley lines. Others might note the clean air, tranquility, and the caring practitioners. Whichever it is, I returned to my stressed city life feeling calm and unburdened. I'll be back for more – but Ask will have to book separately next time. 



The Starhouse



Holistic therapies are on offer

Find out more

Middle Piccadilly, Holwell, Sherborne, Dorset, DT9 5LW, 01963 23468.
www.middlepiccadilly.com
Courses: www.shamanka.com