

A photograph of two women walking through a field of tall, dry grasses. The woman on the left is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is wearing a dark jacket and a patterned scarf. The woman on the right is looking down at the ground. She is wearing a dark jacket and a patterned scarf. The background shows a line of trees under a clear blue sky.

Creative retreats

Lifestyle retreats, where you can recharge your batteries ready to face the year, are no longer the preserve of the rich and famous. Lucy Etherington meets two smart young women running creative arts and yoga based retreats here in Suffolk, as well as in Ibiza and Spain

WITH its eerily beautiful landscapes and endless sky, Suffolk is the perfect retreat locale. I'm amazed more people haven't already tapped into its potential. However, next month, the founders of Circle Retreats are running a four-day Spring Healing retreat in Butley Barns, on the edge of the breath-taking reed beds on the Suffolk coast. There will be yoga, meditation and healthy Ayurveda based meals, and on top of that, creative arts workshops and journal writing.

I head out to Snape to meet Circle Retreat founders Gabriel Marshall and Kryisia Howard, childhood friends who decided to turn their holistic and creative lifestyle philosophy into a business. Even though the Circle Retreats website is refreshingly down-to-earth, and the profile photo is of two lovely women grinning away in dungarees (not Lycra), I was still expecting to meet a couple of earnest Gwyneth Paltrow types who would judge me for my leaky toxins. How wrong I was.

I am ushered out from the cold into Gabriel's lovely, bright flat, overlooking woods and fields and fragrantly warmed by a wood

burner. With cosy sofas covered in cushions and throws and the smell of fresh coffee, I already feel like I've arrived at a retreat.

Gabriel is buzzing around making coffee and chatting, while Kryisia, who lives in Madrid, is serenely curled up in an armchair. She has a deep, infectious chuckle. They both laugh and talk a lot, and it's very easy to get swept up in their enthusiasm and lively energy. Their conversations swing from deep and serious one minute, hilarious the next.

"A few people have noticed our dynamic, that we laugh a lot together," says Gabriel. "But you know how when you are close to someone, you don't necessarily see it."

"We just have fun," says Kryisia. "I think that's why our partnership works." It's the creative aspect of Circle Retreats that makes it different from the usual judgemental 'thou shalt not' attitude of others. Gabriel and Kryisia don't pretend to have all the answers, but with backgrounds in the therapeutic arts, they do have experience and understanding of how creativity can facilitate deeper connectivity.

"It was really important to us to present

'Sometimes we all need time to take ourselves off and curl up with a book. It's about learning to listen to ourselves, to our bodies and feelings, and understanding what we need'



Pictures: SARAH LUCY BROWN

Krysia Howard, one of the creators of Circle Retreats.

2018 RETREATS

Spring Healing Circle Retreat – A Creative Arts and yoga retreat in the heart of the Suffolk countryside, Butley Barns – March 9-13 from £995
 Otono Circle Retreat – Finca del Alamo, Almeira Spain – October 15-20 from £895
 Ibiza Summer Retreat – information coming soon
 For more info go to www.circleretreats.com

But they didn't become close friends until a few years ago, when Gabriel went to Ibiza for a jewellery workshop with Krysia's mum (Krysia, incidentally, had been taught music by Gabriel's father, the composer Julian Marshall). They were surprised to discover strikingly similar ideas about health and wellness, which combined creativity with nutrition, exercise and the environment. While Gabriel was finishing her post-grad training in Arts Psychotherapy and Child Counselling, Krysia was just heading to Madrid to do her MA in Art Therapy. A few Skype chats later, they realised they were in the same zone, and the idea of Circle Retreats was born.

The name of the company comes from Jung, Krysia tells me, who viewed the circle as a symbol of wholeness. They employ local yoga teachers with a similar ethos, and highlight the importance of nutrition in mental and physical health.

"Our chef for the Suffolk retreat is an Ayurvedic practitioner I happened to bump into in a shop," says Gabriel. "Which is typical of the serendipitous way things happen for us." She laughs. "I was earwiggling a conversation and went for a consultation and I realised she was totally on the same page as us."

After hanging out with these ladies for an hour, my fears of being Gwynnied are allayed. They're so easy going, fun and amusingly self-deprecating – "I challenge you to take a decent photo of us," Gabriel tells our photographer, Sarah, as we trudge into a muddy field for an outside shot. "No one has done it yet!"

"At the end of our last retreat we asked people what they'd take away with them, and one person said laughter," Krysia says. "Although there are a range of emotions that can come up, I think laughter is one of the few that grounds you in the here and now. It so releasing, it relaxes you physically."

Sign me up! ♦

ourselves as genuine people," explains Krysia. "We don't make any claims and we don't expect people to do what they don't want to do. There are no rules. It's not wall-to-wall yoga. Sometimes we all need time to take ourselves off and curl up with a book. It's about learning to listen to ourselves, to our bodies and feelings, and understanding what we need."

The retreat begins with a workshop, but it's not about learning artistic skills. It's about letting go of all your beliefs about your creativity, and yourself, and having fun with that. Messy fun from the sounds of it.

"So many people have spent their whole lives thinking they can't draw or they're not good at art," says Gabriel. "But as soon as you take away what's right and wrong and disengage with the critical brain, it's like a wellspring of creativity is released. It's magical." Krysia and Gabriel pretty much grew up together. Their parents – musicians and artists – are close friends, and both families moved from London to Devon. Gabriel's parents now live in Suffolk too.



Krysia Howard, one of the creators of Circle Retreats.