

how serene was my valley

by Sarah Brooks photographed by Tony Amos styled by Judith Cook

It's easy to get stuck in a rut, just responding to the demands of everyday life. Exercise, eat well, take time out—we all know the mantra for healthy living. This is the time to put good intentions into practice for a glowing summer. *IN STYLE* sent actress Sigrid Thornton to Elysia, Golden Door's luxurious health retreat in the Hunter Valley, for the ultimate chance to try new approaches to wellbeing. "It was just so invigorating, and fantastic that you can learn so much in such a short space of time," says Thornton of her week-long stay. Take inspiration: plan your own escape or learn how to relax; feel refreshed and revitalise your routines, wherever this finds you.

wellbeing

RELAX The picturesque winding country road to The Golden Door Elysia is where the journey towards a healthier mind and body begins. Its location high above the vineyards of New South Wales's Hunter Valley gives the 18-hectare property a sense of peace and tranquillity that is echoed throughout Elysia's light-filled interiors. "You just can't help feeling relaxed," says Thornton after spending only a few hours at the retreat. "There is virtually no ambient noise and all your senses are being calmed by the atmosphere."

Thornton, 45, was overdue for some rest and recuperation. "I'm always pretty full-on," she says of her schedule, but as any

working mother—son Ben is 19 and daughter Jaz is 12—knows, "there are spurts of extra-full-on."

The past year has been particularly draining, she says, with back-to-back commitments, including performing onstage in *The Blue Room* and working as an ambassador for World Vision HIV.

Elysia, one of three Golden Door properties in Australia, works on the initial premise that making time for yourself—whether it's relaxing in the bath or going on a holiday or a retreat—is part of the essential balance of life. "You get time to think when you're resting and there are no distractions," agrees Thornton.



Blue horizon: a relaxed Thornton prepares to soak up the sun by the pool.



Comfort meets luxury in the spa area.

From Elysia's spa menu

■ **Active Concentrate Skin Therapy:**

an anti-ageing facial, using Babor products, which helps soften the appearance of wrinkles. "It was amazing and really plumped up my skin," Thornton says.

■ **Hot Stone Therapy:**

a massage incorporating hot stones placed on the body to aid relaxation. "This is so refreshing—an unexpected pleasure."

■ **Mud Moor Bath:**

a luxurious bath in Canadian-sourced mud, which is intended to ease tired or aching muscles while stimulating circulation.

■ **Lomi Lomi:**

a Hawaiian massage technique incorporating long, sweeping movements across the body to help restore the balance of mind, body and soul. "You can't help feeling great afterwards," says Thornton.

■ **Watsu:**

a signature treatment at the retreat (see opposite), performed in a private heated pool, with the body supported by flotation devices. Combining therapeutic benefits of shiatsu massage with gentle gliding and stroking movements over the body, it aims to induce a deep sense of relaxation.

Among the more traditional relaxation activities offered at Elysia are Tai Chi, meditation sessions and yoga classes. For Thornton, it was a shiatsu massage that really set the tone for her stay: "I felt so relaxed and calm, but energised at the same time."

REFRESH

From the wall of water that greets guests at reception to the gently trickling "spring" that welcomes walkers who take the spiral, lavender-scented path up Meditation Hill, one of Elysia's themes is to clear and to cleanse. Accommodation in villa-style apartments is luxurious yet uncluttered, a study in zen-like neutral hues framing the view across a landscape of muted greens.

The retreat's changing daily schedule begins at 7 AM and ends at 5 PM. Hourly options range across gym workouts and various sports, with activities such as indoor hockey, fitball, cardio-boxing and



A Funk Stretch class with Tobias Munday.

even swimming-stroke correction—all intended to inspire participants to make or renew a commitment to fitness.

Many of the retreat's guests are trying to achieve major changes to their lifestyle—pampering and physical activity are all part

STRESS BUSTERS—EIGHT GOLDEN DOOR RULES

from the spa group's managing director, Brook Ramage

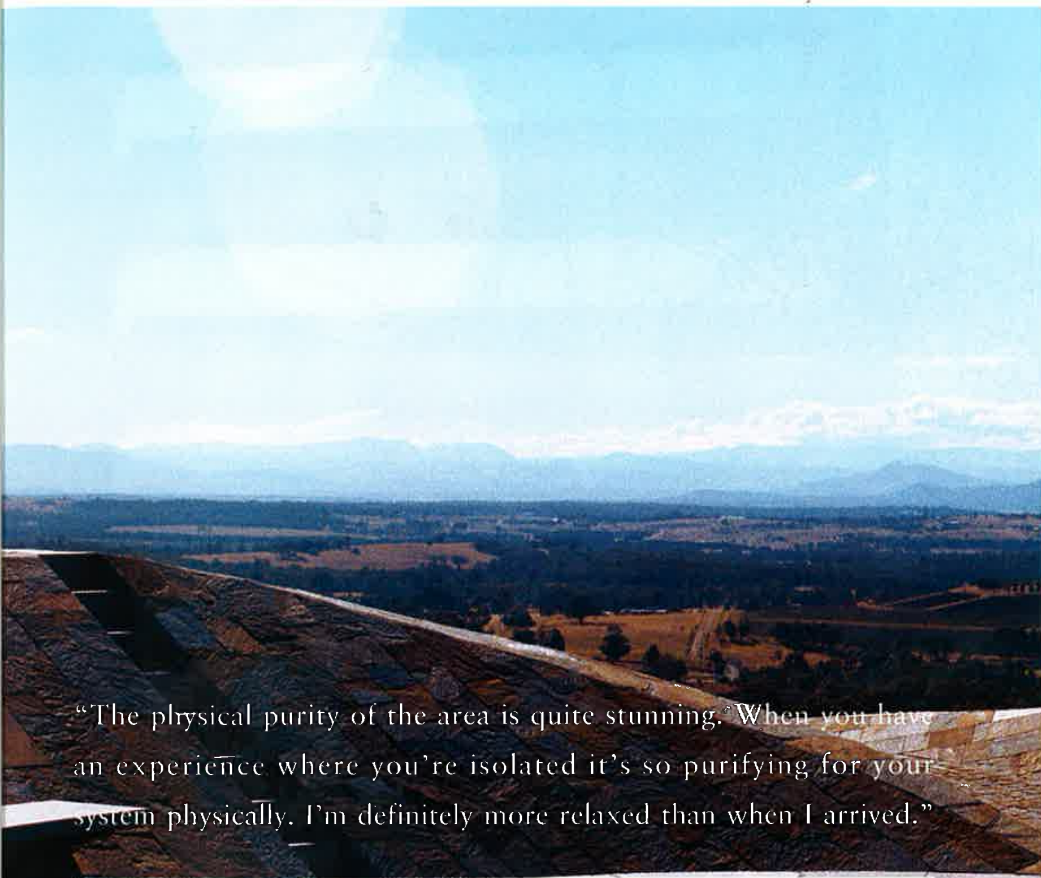
- 1 Eat regular, healthy meals** to maintain your blood sugar and energy levels. If you have erratic eating habits, this is likely to cause mood swings.
- 2 Do exercise that you enjoy every day.** The more often you do it, the better you will feel about yourself and your body, and the more positive your outlook on life will be.
- 3 Practise relaxation in whatever form suits your lifestyle.** Even 10 minutes a day of, say, deep breathing will clear your mind and help you focus.
- 4 Control your self-talk.** Be positive in your opinion of yourself.
- 5 Get outside in the sunshine.** The point is not to get a tan, but to encourage happy hormones and boost your mood.
- 6 Use your support network.** Talk about any problems you may have with like-minded friends, family or people in similar situations. Communication helps relieve the stresses and isolated feelings of life's difficult times.
- 7 Plan.** The more you know about the likely outcome of a situation, the better you will be able to deal with it.
- 8 Be grateful for what you have.** Don't keep comparing yourself with others because this will have a negative effect on you.

wellbeing

of Elysia's strategy to help them make the adjustment.

A personal health and lifestyle assessment on arrival provides a current health reading that helps set the optimum program for each guest's stay. "My health checked out really well," says Thornton, whose exercise routine already incorporated working on cardiovascular fitness and strength up to three times a week with a personal trainer, the author of wellbeing titles, Donna Aston. "I'm fairly disciplined and have been for a long time," says Thornton. However, the diverse program on offer at Elysia encouraged her to "discover new interests ... like tennis. I thought when the weather gets warmer I should have lessons." She delighted in the opportunity to "dip in", choosing extra activities each day, also because she felt compelled to "earn my pampering", she says, referring to the many spa treatments on offer.

From the services of a naturopath to a Skin Radiance facial, from seminars on women's health to a regenerating Face Contour Treatment, Elysia offers a holistic approach to beauty that guests can later emulate at home by combining the services of their favourite practitioners. "We always take into account the overall health of the client so we can prescribe the most beneficial treatments," says senior beauty therapist Brooke White. The condition of a person's skin



"The physical purity of the area is quite stunning. When you have an experience where you're isolated it's so purifying for your system physically. I'm definitely more relaxed than when I arrived."



Vistas of opportunity: Thornton relaxes on one of many balconies at Elysia.



Elysia's Banana Nut Muffins

(makes 15 muffins)

- 2 tbsp orange zest
- 175g crunchy peanut butter (100% peanuts, unsalted, no added sugar)
- 2 large bananas, mashed roughly
- 200ml natural skim yoghurt
- 3 tsp honey
- 2 eggs
- 180g wholewheat flour, sifted
- 45g buckwheat flour
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 60g sunflower seeds
- 1 cup bran flakes

Preheat oven to 180°C and grease muffin tin. Combine orange zest, peanut butter, bananas, yoghurt, honey and eggs. In a separate bowl, combine flours, cinnamon, baking powder and baking soda. Mix the wet and dry ingredients together, then stir in sunflower seeds and bran flakes. Bake for 15-20 minutes (or until a skewer inserted into the centre of a muffin comes out clean).

often reflects her reaction to stress, she says—a facial that incorporates massage is important because “it not only tones the muscles, but gives you time out, which in turn relaxes you” and gets the complexion glowing.

REVITALISE Maximising energy levels is easily achieved at Elysia, where calm facilitates relaxation and nutritious meals do the rest. Thornton has developed her own strategies for maintaining energy, particularly when she has demanding roles. Her turn in *The Blue Room*, for example—apart from the much-publicised nude scenes—included “full-on dance routines every night. I had to eat little and often so I could keep up the pace.”

Elysia's dietitian, Karen Fry, makes the same recommendation to guests, suggesting they eat five small meals a day to help them maintain the energy they need for the resort's daily activities. “Snacking on a piece of fruit between meals is enough to pep you up,” says Fry, who follows the National Health and Medical Research Council's *Dietary Guidelines for Australians* in recommending people eat at least 10 different-coloured fruits and vegetables each week to obtain a broad spectrum of essential vitamins and minerals.

The kitchen at Elysia, however, aims to do more than simply provide fuel. Chefs strive to show how to prepare a cornucopia of ingredients from seeds to steaks and from legumes to luscious fruits (cooking demonstrations are held regularly, and *The Golden Door Low Fat Recipe Book*, \$38.95, is sold through the retreat's website). But above all, the philosophy is to treat food as



Thornton strolls along one of the bushland trails.

a source of enjoyment and to revitalise guests' eating habits. Says Thornton: “I looked forward to meal times as the food was so great and varied. My stay has definitely honed my awareness of food, without becoming obsessive.”

When her week at the resort was up, the actress did not leave empty-handed. She took with her a sense of calm, of being “more unflappable”, and the experience gave her exercise routines “a shot in the arm”. In all, she says, “it was pretty extraordinarily invigorating”. Perhaps it's a spring thing, but with a similar mantra—relax, refresh, revitalise—you, like Thornton, can swan into summer. ■

For more information on Elysia and other Golden Door properties, log on to www.goldendoor.com.au or call 1800 212 011. Elysia tariffs begin at \$520 a day twin-share (three-day minimum stay) and include all meals and facilities, plus a \$100 daily allowance to spend on spa treatments and other services.