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ISLAND RHYTHM

World-renowned for its music scene, Ibiza has now gained global recognition as a wellness destination. Nicola Corfield is moved by a Santhosh yoga and dance retreat that combines the island's two great loves.

"Let go of the thinking mind and tune into the feeling," says yoga teacher James Giuseppi as he guides us through a set of slow Sun Salutations. On a terrace high above the Mediterranean Sea, our session has a view that invites distraction. Yet Giuseppi's skilful cueing draws attention to our breath and inner sensations. As we flow through lunges and Warrior sequences, he encourages us to create a strong foundation through our legs and feet, before leading us into Dancer's Pose, our arms and hearts lifted to the sky.

This is my first morning at Santhosh Retreats, which offers a lively combination of yoga and dance from ballroom to Latin and disco. The name means happiness - a perfect choice for the joyful energy that fills the retreat. Created by life coach and former barrister Samiya Noordeen, Santhosh hosts regular dance classes in London, alongside retreats in Ibiza and bespoke programmes in Noordeen's native Sri Lanka.

The Ibiza retreats take place at Casa La Vista, Noordeen's tranquil finca in the north of the island. We are invited to make ourselves at home, and our small group bonds quickly, immersed in nature and the pulsing of music and laughter. On our first evening we thread our way through the dense pine forest to the sea below, watching the sky turn dusky pink, before returning to cocktails and social dancing. Any initial shyness soon fades as we begin to move to bright salsa and bachata tunes, guided by dance professionals Nuno Sabroso, Gigo Koguashvili and Edgars Menikis.

While some of our group have danced together before at Santhosh's London classes, others are complete beginners. Yet we all find our footing, buoyed by the deft tuition and encouraging atmosphere. The focus here is one of wellbeing, with a programme designed to restore and rejuvenate. "To have an equilibrium in life, human beings have to go both inwards and outwards, which is why our retreats combine yoga and dance," says Noordeen. "Yoga helps you to centre yourself and look within, whereas dance brings out what's stored inside."

As we learn to move our bodies in new ways, the days fly by in a dynamic rhythm. The classes play out in synchronicity, the dance inviting us to explore different forms of expression, the yoga honing our awareness. It is an empowering feeling that deepens as we learn to hold our centre, first through a yoga class focused on abdominal strength, and later in our partner dances. "To dance well, you need to be independent, both in body and spirit," says Noordeen. "If you lean on your partner, they can't move properly. It's something that extends to the heart and the mind too- ultimately we decide on our own happiness."

Inspired, I take this into my one-to-one class with Koguashvili. We each have two individual sessions, tailored to our skills and personalities. While one of our group practises a cabaret-style dance that brings out her inner showgirl, out on the terrace I explore a long-held desire to try lifts. I do my best to engage my core as Koguashvili choreographs an American Smooth routine that spins me high into the air, almost flying. The experience is exhilarating, and has me laughing with delight.

IMAGE BY ANA LUI





IMAGE BY MATT MORGAN

“It’s important to find new ways to do things.
We can learn to wire healthier neural pathways...”

These individual classes are typical of the attentiveness that characterises Santhosh. We are encouraged to shine and discover what makes us feel good, enjoying the air of celebration. The meals are events in themselves, each taking place in a new setting - from a cliff-top surrounded by expanses of sea and sky, to terraces under the stars and a candlelit poolside. We dress up for these exquisite feasts, savouring the sense of occasion as we are served pre-dinner cocktails.

On our penultimate evening, a Japanese menu is rounded off with a large sheet of paper unfurling across the table. Music plays as the chefs and waiters, aided by Sabroso, Koguashvili and Menikis, dance around, artfully scattering brownies, meringues, berries and chocolate sauce. Eyes wide as children, we laugh and clap, before indulging in dessert directly from the table.

This is 6-star luxury - yet what makes it special is the warmth infusing the experience. Noordeen is a charming hostess who welcomes us into her home like close friends. “I’d like to feel we’re an extended social club,” she says. She and the teachers radiate enthusiasm, and their camaraderie is infectious. We are invited to play, putting on fancy dress for a disco-themed workout, and enjoying musical chairs and dinner-party games. It is a generous programme with an endless flow, the evenings evolving into social dance sessions that have us all reluctant to go to bed. With so much to occupy us, we leave the retreat only once, for a sunset hike led by Walking Ibiza, tracing a route around the coastline while the full moon rises.

IMAGE BY ODA BERBY

As the days pass, friendships develop and our group becomes more animated, practising our dance steps and playfully teasing. There is a sense of vitality, as though we have shaken off some of the restraints of everyday life. "We get stuck in patterns," Giuseppi says during a class, guiding us to interlace our fingers with a different thumb on top. "It's important to find new ways to do things. We can learn to wire healthier neural pathways - and this is something we take off the yoga mat and into our real lives."

Our final session links a series of backbends and twists, leading into Crow Pose and Forearm Stand. Giuseppi supports us in the balances, and with his help many of us are able to do them for the first time. I feel strong yet open, attuned to the movements and to my body's internal rhythm. At the end of the class I pause for a moment, hands at the centre of my chest, as Noordeen's words from earlier that day resonate with me. "The mind can justify anything, but the heart can't lie. Santhosh is all about the heart. It's about listening to the music from the heart, and doing yoga with the heart."

Santhosh holds year-round dance classes in London. A dance workshop takes place in Ibiza this March, alongside retreats in June and September. Bespoke retreats in Sri Lanka are available on request. www.santhoshretreats.com

WRITTEN BY

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