



Return of the **'SHROOM**

The healing powers of fungi are well documented. *SOPHIE BENGÉ* tries out a wellness retreat where truffles are on the menu, plus the treatments you should try if you're not ready for the whole trip

TRIPPING WITH TRUFFLES

Sophie Bengé heads to the Netherlands to experience the trip of her life and is so blown away that she wants to eulogise the benefits of controlled psychedelics to anyone willing to listen

Last year was the year in which the conversation about psychedelics changed. Features in all the broadsheets about the impressive and groundbreaking results on the use of psilocybin (the active ingredient in magic mushrooms) to treat depression – and other conditions, such as PTSD, anxiety and anorexia – proliferated. Along with this revival of mainstream medical interest came a new breed of travel experience, too – the psychedelic retreat, a trip to remember in all senses of the word.

Having been a wellness practitioner for the past two decades, this new frontier of ‘wellness tourism’ (overseen by qualified experts, which goes without saying) seems to me to tick the science-meets-spirituality credentials we now seek in our eternal quest for health and happiness. So even before I experienced Beckley Retreats, in a 11-week programme that included a four-day residential in the Netherlands, and was led, by the mushrooms, through the kaleidoscope of my subconscious, I was sold by the concept of psychedelic therapy.

Of course, the mind-altering effects, which have given psychedelics such a bad rap since the Sixties (until now), are exactly why indigenous peoples have been weaving the ceremonial use of actives from cacti, mushrooms and Amazonian vine into their way of life for centuries. They’re respected tools that help them see life situations from a fresh perspective.

In 20th-century Europe and America, the surge in ‘psychopharmacology’ took these plant compounds into a lab setting to test their chemical effects on the brain’s plasticity. Intellectuals, like Aldous Huxley and Sigmund Freud, were experimenting with LSD (synthesised fungus) and mescaline (cactus) and reporting their existential experiences on the drugs, which morphed into feelings



of being reborn. As 1950s psychologist Humphry Osmond wrote: ‘to fathom hell or soar angelic, just take a pinch of psychedelic’.

However, in the late Sixties the psychedelic train hit the buffers with the cross-over into hippy culture. Harvard professor Timothy Leary’s infamous LSD-fuelled ‘Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out’ counterculture contributed to its prohibition by press and politics as they attempted to quash anti-government sentiment at the time of the Vietnam War. In 1968, the US federal government criminalised the possession of psychedelics.

Thence, the movement has been operating under the radar of inaccurate perceptions until the so-called ‘psychedelic renaissance’ of the last few years, in which one English countess is at the vanguard.

For six decades, Amanda Feilding, Countess of Wemyss, has worked tirelessly to put her own drug-induced changes of consciousness through a rigorous scientific lens. ‘My mission,’ she tells me, ‘has been to show how these compounds positively impact connectivity in the brain and how they can help us become a happier, healthier species.’ Now, aged 80, she is rightly having her time in the sun: fêted in the press as the ‘Acid Queen’ and awarded for her contribution toward transforming society.

Her journey into psychedelics started as a child after some mystical encounters with fairies among the hedges of her home, Beckley Park in Oxfordshire. It continued during her LSD-fuelled youth to eventually inspire her life’s work: the formation of her Beckley Foundation. For 25 years she’s been collaborating with leading neuroscientists on university research programmes (more than 60) that are now proving a role for psychedelics – LSD, MDMA, 5DMT, ayahuasca and ibogaine – to treat such diverse conditions as PTSD, depression, Alzheimer’s, even nicotine addiction. Now the mission in the psychedelics world is ‘medicalise to legalise’.





Up to 20 guests are welcome at the Netherlands Beckley Retreats programme



Amanda Feilding, aka the 'Acid Queen'

Outside of mental health, there are manifold benefits too, as many of us 'healthy normals' are starting to realise how our rigid thinking and recurring life blocks really need a shake-up.

My ambition was to break my scarcity mindset around money. I liked the idea of busting my financial block without effort – thinking my way out of this conundrum had not been yielding results. So I signed up to Beckley Retreats (it does not have an official tie with Amanda's foundation but is loosely affiliated). This programme was founded in 2021 by Afghanistan combat veteran Neil Markey, who only really healed his post-war trauma with psilocybin experiences.

While the 'tripping with truffles' happens for about 10 hours over two ceremonies, during the four-day retreat, the experience starts well before and continues for six weeks afterwards in the form of short daily practices and weekly group calls. It is this deep preparation and integration that stands Beckley Retreats head and shoulders above many psychedelic companies when it comes to pastoral care of guests – something to research when choosing a retreat. On gentle instruction, I was encouraged to forgo alcohol and coffee, to journal, to set my intentions, remain celibate and up my walks in nature, for four weeks prior to landing in Amsterdam and making my way to New Eden, a woodland location around 90 miles away. There are a maximum of 20 guests per retreat.

'Sometimes people have challenging experiences but the net effect is positive with the safe container we create,' explains Neil, whose retreat team of six love us and judge-us-not as the hallucinogens unleash hardcore reactions in some. They hug, hold and bless us with indescribably beautiful music to take us through

the ripples and waves.

As for me, the fungi carried me fast, as if on a flying carpet, through a vortex of colour, shape and visions of my daughter. I've berated myself for not always being present as a mother when she was small, while chasing unsatisfactory relationships to plug the gap of a failed marriage. But a smiling Daisy (now 23) poured in to remind me of bike rides, picnics and make-believe games we shared in her young years. My ancestors also appeared with gratitude for the healing process I did for them some years ago. In a five-hour flow of tears, pangs of nausea, incessant yawning and conscious deep breathing to keep steady on the 'carpet', I found insight, cathartic release and validation of the work I've done on myself over the years.

I'm sure my long wellness experience helped me surrender to the higher power of the fungi, rather than let my rational brain fight to make sense of them. The journeys for some among our high-achieving group, including a Bombay business owner, war veteran, NGO boss, chef, photographer and gallerist, were less benign, spiked with archetypal tricksters, such as wolves, rats and demons.

Yet, by the time we left the safe haven of morning yoga and meditation, of trance-state breath work (that can fiddle with consciousness), songs around the fire, art therapy and the human bonding that comes from being vulnerable, we all concluded the same thing: that the metaphorical, well furrowed, sled grooves on our mental hillsides had dissipated under a fresh fall of snow. We saw the world with the wonder of our childhood eyes.

The big question is, as the book title goes: *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (Jack Kornfield). In other words, the key to long-term neuroplasticity is the integration work post-trip. This is not a weekend break, nor a magic bullet. In the burst of

psychedelic retreats, Beckley is particularly strong on its 'Rewiring Programme', crafted by Lucyne Jade, a psychotherapist who's led over a thousand psychedelic ceremonies. She's a pearl and shares practices to embed the change in our neural pathways, committing us to ongoing inner work to manifest our dreams. It's the gentle accountability we need to keep the post-retreat diamonds from turning into pebbles as normal life takes hold again.

Six weeks on, I reflect on my intention around money. Things have shifted and I'm financially fluid. Thank you, fungi, I'm forever in awe of you, the mycelium networks and, quite literally, the brains beneath our feet.

BOOK IT: Beckley Retreats in the Netherlands now run for five nights, costing from €5,500 (shared room) with a maximum of 20 participants. The price includes vegetarian meals. beckleyretreats.com



IT'S COOL TO BE WOO

If you don't want to go as far as a mushroom retreat, try these practitioners to reboot you physically – and spiritually, says *Caroline Phillips*

Spirituality and formerly arcane practices have gone mainstream, with CEOs, lawyers and HNWs seeking help from tarot readers to people 'in spirit' to make those big decisions. Yes, hedgies to bankers – and at least one newspaper proprietor – have become 'seekers'. The pandemic and financial crisis were the catalyst, but colour healing, bodywork and crystals – once the domain of hippies and New Agers – are now sought by masters of the universe types wanting self-knowledge and clarity on their personal lives, careers and next steps. Here are the therapists, gurus and guides helping these folk release their trauma, access a greater wisdom, and transform themselves. Their mantra is that you can't change our turbulent world, but you can become the change you want to see.



Unlock emotional blockages with treatments that help you spiritually as well as physically



1 The Reflexologist

ANABEL CUTLER

Anabel offers a truly transformational combo of facial and foot reflexology, reiki and crystal healing. Working from a swanky Portland Hospital clinic, she specialises in fertility, pregnancy and postpartum, often treating couples through maternity. Clients glow about getting pregnant or kickstarting lactation after sessions – but men and older women also bag her for health boosts and insomnia/anxiety/stress busters in her North London consulting room. An intuitive, she'll read your energy, lift your spirits with essential oils, massage facial pressure points with a natural jade roller and Gua Sha stones, then press on your feet to resolve underlying body imbalances. You'll leave calm and energised. *From £95, reflexologyforlife.space*

2 The Trauma Specialist

SHERYL CLOSE

Sheryl Close is one of the country's leading trauma specialists. Everyone, from CEOs to bankers and therapists, beats a path to her light and bright Harley Street eyrie. She works wonders with psychotherapy and bodywork (done either by the client focusing on the body part, with mindful intention, or through physical touch). Whether she's using SE, SRR or TEB (respectively Somatic Experiencing, Somatic Resilience and Regulation, and Transforming the Experience-Based Brain) she'll be regulating your nervous system, working on your adrenals and brain stem, and reducing your cortisol and adrenaline levels. It's life changing. *£150, sherylclose.co.uk*

3 The Colour Therapist

MARK WENTWORTH

Everyone's born with a life purpose. Using your date of birth and name, Mark Wentworth reveals your inherent nature through your colour 'DNA', then guides you – using your specific 'inner palette' – to live your unique life. He may use colour healing – perhaps liberating you from unhealthy family patterns – help you with decorating choices, or use visualisation and depth psychology. He works with creative agencies seeking new visions through to international companies wanting to improve team dynamics. (If you're yellow, you'll like strategies but may clash with someone who's red and into immediate action.) Unsurprisingly, he boasts Zoom clients in every time zone. *£135, colourforlife.com*



4 The Tarot Reader

ANNABELLE MITZMAN

Attend a group tarot-reading-cum-class in her gracious St John's Wood home – amid eclectic art – and you'll find lawyers, architects and squillionaires as your fellow clients. You'll get wine, nibbles and wisdom from Annabelle, an effervescent and eternally optimistic woman with a photographic memory for clients' cards – even ones picked by folk when she started 40 years ago. Expect (Stanford-educated) Annabelle to interpret swords, cups and high priestesses with uncanny detail and accuracy, and to empower you to make decisions for positive change. Book a private reading if groups aren't your thing. *Group sessions, £20. +44 (0)7974 787217; mail@annabelletarot.com*

5 The Medium

PENNY FRANCIS

Psychic and international medium Penny doesn't have a crystal ball, practise the dark arts or look like a witch. Instead, this elegant Lincolnshire woman may be running a workshop, doing spiritual assessments for business leaders or holding demonstrations of mediumship across Europe. She contacts people 'in spirit' and reports back with other-worldly accuracy – maybe capturing the words, smell and essence of a beloved friend or granny who's passed. Perhaps giving you information about your childhood experiences. And always offering healing and new options – although she's not into prophecies. Afterwards you'll feel empowered. Think beacon of light. *From £40, pennyfrancismedium.com*

6 The Astrologer

LYN BIRKBECK

Lyn offers an astrological consultation that's unlike any newspaper's. This astrologer of 40 years' standing plots your chart – the symbolic map of your potential that's depicted in the sky at your birth – then helps you decipher the planets' sign and house positions, identifying the truth of your being more than predicting what'll happen to you. You'll explore your issues – past, present and future – and connect to your inner guru and possibly past lives too. He sends you a free written year guide afterwards. Author of nine books, he's well spoken and wears a baseball cap – and he may just penetrate your psyche. *Full consultation, £125. lynbirkbeck.com* ■

