

Postcards from

the Edge



New Masculinity courses are now a fully-fledged part of the wellness industry, but 'searching for your inner hero' isn't something we can all easily surrender to. GQ took up the challenge



WORDS NASRI ATALLAH PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID FULLER

Shouting your intentions into the void and embracing the support of the group are key moments of a New Masculinity retreat

THE NIGHT BEFORE I drive out to Norfolk, I can't sleep. My thoughts are a mess. What if I have to tell these strangers things I don't want to tell them? Will everyone there hate me for showing up for the sole purpose of writing about my experience? Why did I even suggest doing this in the first place? I feel a tightness in my chest as I go to bed.

The reason I'm so tense is that I'm about to head to a 'New Masculinity' retreat run by Rebel Wisdom, a media company founded by journalist David Fuller and writer and facilitator Alexander 'Ali' Beiner. It aims to reboot how we think about philosophy and our bodies—looking to bridge lived experience and open-minded debate. Their channels feature the kind of long-form content that has created an entire subculture on YouTube and in podcasts, with huge names such as Ryan Holiday bringing ideas like stoicism back into the daily vernacular of millions around the world. "The retreats actually pre-date the media platform," says David. "We've always run the two in parallel and firmly believe that you can't just watch yourself to an experience that changes you, we actually need to do the practices. We're fundamentally about bringing the two together, the ideas and the practices."

The fact is that I'm going into this open-minded but sceptical, and I tell the founders as much before heading out to the retreat's home at a place called West Lexham—described as 'an ethical haven of magical treehouses and bell tents'. The only promise I give ahead of time is that I will fully engage.

The drive to Norfolk from my home in North London is arduous, the first obstacle I have to overcome, Storm Eunice—the worst the island has seen in three decades—is battering the UK. My arms are locked throughout, keeping the steering wheel steady as winds up to 150 kmh sweep across the motorway. As I creep into the countryside, uprooted trees litter the road and I'm met by the awful sight of dead foxes and pheasants. If this weekend is meant to be a primordial reconnection with myself, this is a spectacular way to kick it off.

When I get to the retreat, housed in a manor with a network of cottages and barns, there's a power cut. Candles flicker across the dining hall as we all get to know each other over small talk and lateral flow tests. The men gathered

here come from a range of backgrounds: police officers, former soldiers, mental health workers, doctors, accountants, photographers, set designers.

After some introductions and house-keeping rules, we settle into our first exercise in the main room. We walk around in circles, covering each inch of the space we'll inhabit for the next few days. I size everyone up as we are told to stare into each other's eyes as we pass. Depending on who I connect with, I detect every emotion from aggression to kindness. I find myself wondering why this retreat is just for men, a thought I will come back to a lot over the course of the weekend. We are asked to make commitments to ourselves for the coming days. The ugly scribble in my notebook stares starkly back at me: *I promise I will not be afraid of change.*

I quickly realise this will be a difficult commitment to stick to as we start a trust exercise in the small groups of five men and a facilitator that we will remain in for the rest of the retreat. One person stands in the middle, eyes closed. He lets himself fall in various directions as the closest person catches him and rocks him gently back to the centre. I'm surprised by how trusting everyone is. I almost drop a couple of my group mates who have given themselves fully to the exercise. When my turn comes around, I find myself completely incapable of

letting go. "I guess I have trust issues" I think to myself, in the first of many realisations to come.

The weekend is framed by organisers David and Ali as a Hero's Journey, the mythological monomyth popularised by American writer Joseph Campbell, himself influenced by Carl Jung's analytical psychology. I'm familiar with the Hero's Journey from my screenwriting and fiction writing, but I've never really thought of it as a tool for personal development. Luke Skywalker and Harry Potter are brought up, and we receive our lightsabers and wands in the form of the principles that will guide the process.

Depending on how you count, the global wellness industry is valued at anywhere between \$1.5-4.5 trillion. Big business. But I don't feel anything being sold to me here, although the names of apps and industry figureheads will come up over the course of the two days. I feel cynicism dispel as I come into contact with the experience itself. I am surrounded by more than 20 men who are dedicating three days of their life to becoming better people. It's the kind of thing that's easy to misunderstand or mock from a distance, but once you're up close it feels special.

As the first evening draws to a close, we tell each other why we're here, in our little circle. I go quickly from 'to write an article for *GQ*' to something deeper and uncomfortable. I haven't been here for two hours yet and already I'm revealing insecurities about my career, the time I've wasted and the precarious positions I often find myself in.

The next morning, we wake up at 6:45am. By 7am we are in the main room doing the thing I've probably been dreading most: exercise. Led by one of the volunteers, a former Royal Marine, we run around in circles, our jogging punctuated by squats, planks, push-ups. Everything reminds me how hard the past two years have been on my mind, but also on my body. I am suddenly very aware that I am less than a year away from turning 40.

After breakfast we have a dance to Darude's "Sandstorm" and The Prodigy's "Firestarter". These songs also remind me that I'm almost 40. I remember the years they came out (2000 and 1996, in case you're wondering), how excited I'd get playing them alone in my teenage bedroom. I find it surprisingly easy to dance to them in this new setting, I >>

The weekend retreats often include sharing your deepest, darkest fears and concerns with a group of complete strangers

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realise it probably isn't even 8:30am yet. I wonder why I can't dance like this in 'normal life' unless I've had a few drinks. *Dance more often* becomes a new aim.

We are now primed for the next process: inquiry and active listening. We are paired off, seated on two folding wooden chairs face-to-face with a man from our group. The process involves speaking for a set amount of time with the understanding that the person facing you is engaged in active listening—including full eye-contact. It is a deeply odd way of communicating, I find it very difficult to maintain eye-contact and realise how terrible I am at it generally. But once you're through the first round of talking this way, you are hit with the realisation that life would be so much better if we did this more often with those we care about.

Every step of the way we are being told where we are in the hero's journey. We are now at the 'entrance of the cave'. We are told to visualise a man we despise. I'm surprised by the person I have in mind. I resent how quick he is to anger. I guess it's what I've often despised about myself too. The visualisation feels like it's taking forever, when I open my eyes I'm already drained.

We then walk around the room. We are told to start vocalising our disdain of this person. Suddenly, more than 20 men start shouting and roaring around me. For the first time I feel uncomfortable. I've shouted like this in the past. I think back to fights in Beirut traffic where I could tap into that rage all-too-easily. I feel like I'm in a room full of every version of myself I've hated over the years. I decide to be incredibly calm and just breathe. I worry that I might ruin it for everyone or be seen as the writer observing rather than engaging. But as I get quiet and focussed, I feel powerful. I feel confident that I'm still playing along with the purpose of the session.

Besides being the first time I'm uncomfortable, it's also the first time I think my background might be affecting my experience. Most of the room—like 86 per cent of the UK—is white. I feel that being Arab and Eastern Mediterranean, my ability to tap into an Earth-shattering rage isn't something I need help accessing. In the next part of this session, two men square off opposite each other. They interlock shoulders and roar into each other's faces. Again, I don't want to ruin this for anyone. I stare into the eyes of my partner, trying to silently commu-

nicate that he's free to shout as loud as he wants into my face, but that I will stay here in absolute stillness. I will later be told by some of the men that this was the moment they realised I had principled positions on what I would and wouldn't do. It's the moment they respected me. Weird that it was the moment where I felt everyone in the room hated me.

In one of the rare moments where I step outside to spend a minute by myself, I notice the storm has passed. A quick glance at my phone reveals how devastating it has been for the country. I realise how isolated we are out here. I wonder when the 'masculinity' part of the retreat kicks in. I wonder why I don't normally enjoy the company of groups of men or traditional male bonding experiences.

Our next session is about going into the underworld, which honestly sounds ominous. I'm starting to feel quite raw at this point, as we've spent a lot of time talking about and listening to deep-seated issues. We are told it is a breathing

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exercise though, which sounds simple enough. Until I discover that it is a 45-minute controlled breathing session. I find myself panicking a little. I have a notoriously hard time with my breathing. I have had panic attacks in the past due to how not-in-control of my breathing I am. I recently wrote a whole essay entitled “The Shallows” for a forthcoming anthology about all the times my breath has ruined my life. I'm surprised to learn that this kind of controlled breathing emerged as a way to replicate psychedelic experiences when the substances themselves were banned in the US in the '70s.

The breathwork keeps us in pairs. By this time I've spent most of the day with Michael, a charming dulcet-toned, bearded Glaswegian who runs a mindfulness charity. One person lies down (the breather) while the other (the sitter) stays by their head observing them and supporting them through the experience. I have no idea what to expect,

I've never attempted anything beyond a five-minute meditation with the help of a stupid iPhone app.

The first 10 minutes it just feels like I'm in pain. I keep my inhales and exhales in sync with everyone in the room. Then, suddenly, we all start breathing at different rhythms. I hear sounds from the other breathers. People are yelling in between breaths: pain, laughter, pandemonium. The pain migrates into my hands. We were warned they would clamp up as the oxygen levels in our body changed. I move my hands above my belly and chest to loosen them up. It feels like they're helping move air through my system. Like a breathwork Jedi. I suddenly hit a state that feels like euphoria. I feel tears forming. Before I understand what is happening, I start crying uncontrollably. Sobbing and shaking as I continue the breathing. Michael's hand holds my right shoulder. Then another person holds my left shoulder. I feel supported both physically and emotionally. It is strange and wonderful. I

think about my parents, my sister, my wife, how I want to tell them I love them when I'm back home. I think: *my life has just changed. I know how to breathe now* and I smile.

The 45-minutes end faster than I imagined they would. I emerge slowly, disoriented and euphoric. I grab my notebook and write down everything I've just felt. I can already see the moment slipping away from me. I feel bad about my assumptions again. If someone had told me about this thing I've just done, just as I'm telling you about it now, I'd have a well-prepared snarky comment about New Age woo-woo bull**** to deploy. But as I sit there, I feel transformed and grateful my cynicism has brought me to this place.

But for all the success, there's a point I stumble on all weekend. I still don't understand what this retreat has to do with masculinity. The word 'brothers' is used a lot, and the importance of being with other men throughout this pro- >>

Work on the power of breath as well as finding your path on the 'hero's journey' are things you get to grips with as a newly close-knit group

cess is emphasised. But to me it seems like a wellness retreat. A wonderful and transformative one, but not particularly male. Similar retreats, such as the Seven-day Path of Love (run by Rebel Wisdom's founders' mentor Rafia Morgan) are mixed. I ask David about this. "We downplay the male-specific aspect of the group to a degree, because we don't want to put forward a set of concepts around masculinity for the men to accept or reject, so if your experience was that it was a universal experience rather than one tied to masculinity then that's a perfectly valid interpretation, you clearly fully immersed yourself in the process." Ali adds "Mixed groups are wonderful and important, but there's a different energy. I've noticed many men feel more comfortable being vulnerable in a space of only men. They may find it easier to talk about their sexuality or intimate relationships for example."

My personal struggle to see the world through masculine and feminine comes to head in a session loosely based around some of the archetypes discussed in *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine* a book by Robert Moore and Doug Gillette that is referenced regularly over the weekend. But by this point, I understand that I don't have to buy into every minute of the weekend to extract meaning and knowledge from the experience. My mind wanders and I start to think there is such a thing as too much personal development work. It's actually a conversation with a friend about this point that led me to this isolated, wind-battered part of Norfolk. I think of that friend for a moment, and I'm thankful for our conversations. Just as with any form of education or introspection, at some point you have to put things into practice.

As we near the end of the weekend, we get into our small groups and tell each other what kind of man we want to be. Then the rest of the group tells the person speaking what they have seen in the past two days that would stop you from reaching that goal. To my surprise, everyone is incredibly insightful about the rest of the group. It is almost worrying to what extent we can be seen if we spend two days being fully open with one another. The group is near-unanimous in what will hold me back: my fear of risk-taking. Although I normally enjoy vulnerability, I usually select what

I want to be vulnerable about and this feels uncomfortable.

I feel drained from all the release and sharing. I've had a migraine for 24 hours, and it is still hammering at my temples like an angry neighbour trying to knock down the front door of a nearby house party. As I breathe through it, I think to myself that this experience is at its best when it's at its simplest. Breathing, a supportive hand on your shoulder, the knowledge that someone understands what you're going through—or even better, that they empathise in silence.

The final event of the weekend takes us outside. I don my Merrell hiking boots (that have never been used for hiking), Berghaus baseball cap and a Uniqlo jacket I've bought for this weekend. I'm cosplaying as someone who spends time outside in the British wilderness. The truth is, at about this time on a normal Sunday I'd be figuring out the best place to get brunch. As we all gather in a circle by a wood and glass orangery away from the main buildings, Ali explains why we are here. We are at the last stage of our transformation. We are about to cross the threshold between the paved slabs we stand on and the grass that leads towards a rock facing the stream beyond. And the threshold between who we were on Friday morning and who we will be when we head home. We will climb onto

the rock and shout an intention for ourselves into the world.

At first I can't see how I'm going to take this seriously. The first person heads out. We stand in silence as they make the 30 or 40 steps to the rock. They take a minute and scream their sentence into the void. As they walk back, the small unit of men that has been their support network for the whole weekend awaits them for a welcoming embrace. As the first few men go up, I find myself getting emotional again. Suddenly, it feels easy taking this seriously. I clench my fists and decide to go next. I march forward with focus. I pause at the edge of the last concrete slab. As I pass the threshold, I place my hand on the wet grass, like a Brazilian footballer touching the pitch and looking up to the heavens. I stride towards the rock. The grass and mud make my walk more uneven than I would like. I climb onto the rock and with far more ferocity than I had imagined shout out "I will take f***** risks" into the cold air ahead of me. I feel the roar go through the stream below and the trees ahead. I shout so hard I lose my footing and stumble off the rock. I pound my chest and shout as I stare into the ground. I keep staring down as I walk back to my group, still pounding my chest. "In the eyes!" they shout at me. I lift my head and catch their gaze, these five strangers who have seen me fall apart and come back together over the course of the weekend. I smile as we embrace. I tear up again.

As I load up the car with my stuff, ready for the drive back though the third storm of the week, I am happy to be alone for the next three hours. I came to this place not quite sure what to expect. I leave with clarity, breathing techniques, and aches from my first pushups in a few years. I leave having messaged the people I love most in the world words I hadn't thought of expressing in a while, if ever. I leave with unexpected friendships. I worry I will be weird when I get home. By the time I reach North London, I haven't really communicated with my wife in three days, save for the odd message. As soon as she sees me, she stops what she's doing. "You look different. No, you feel different," she says with a smile, looking at me across the living room. Resist it as you might, but when you embark on a hero's journey, you are bound to come home a changed man. ■

At the end of the two-day retreat, you hopefully have a clear set of intentions and a new group of friends to go with them

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