

Lost & found

This uniquely off-the-grid festival, held in the remotest locations, is building a reputation for the deepest reconnection, rejuvenation and self-rediscovery, as Eva Ramirez discovers

Last summer, I took a two-week break from work, life and London to set myself a challenge. My goal was to get lost. I work in the wellness industry, but like so many of us, can find myself feeling the burnout effects of overexertion. Every so often, it gets to Sunday and I look back on my week to realise that I've been running on autopilot since Monday – work, workout, eat, socialise, sleep – often without stopping at all. I don't put aside any time to tune out, which I've now come to realise, means there's no room to tune in.

There was something about Restival, which I stumbled upon while scrolling through Instagram (the irony is not lost on me...), that spoke out to me. I clicked on the link, and



emailed the founder. The more I learned, the more I realised this had to be something I did alone. At 26, I'd never travelled on my own, but I signed up before any doubts or second thoughts could surface. This. Was. Happening.

Restival 2016 took place in a slice of desert that sits between Grand Falls, San Francisco Peaks and the Roden Crater, in a place the Native American Navajo people call Dinétah, meaning 'Homeland'. Founder Caroline Jones set about bringing together the best parts of a festival and a retreat, after realising that people were craving an antidote to modern life. 'I had grown tired of the old festival format and didn't want to attend a retreat that involved lots of periods of silence or listening to gurus,' she says.

Instead, Restival aims to 'take people out of the isolation created by technology' by bringing them to off-the-grid locations where they interact with indigenous tribes. These close ties with the lifestyle and culture of local native communities charmed and attracted me. I was after a learning experience with far more depth than the beach-set yoga retreats I'd been looking into. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to eject myself entirely from my hyper-connected, fast-paced London life and experience a week of self-exploration in a whole new setting. And before I knew it, I was on a flight to Flagstaff, Arizona.

Getting off the grid

Myself and two others on the same flight were collected from the airport and driven to camp. I felt nervous, excited, brave and disorientated throughout the journey. The vast expanse of badlands stretched before us from every angle, giving a whole new meaning to the phrase 'the middle of nowhere'. It felt like being on a conveyor belt – epic mountain after mountain after mountain. An hour and a half later, we saw the first hint of a tepee and, soon after, the entire cluster appeared. I hadn't been expecting Glastonbury proportions, but what struck me was how small and isolated the campsite looked amidst the barren desert.

I've been to many places that promised a complete 'digital detox', but that were still very much wi-fi friendly. This was different – we really were completely cut off from the outside world. The campsite can't be found on Google maps and even the clock on my mobile phone jumped back and forth between time zones. There was no reception and no wi-fi. Aside from being used to take photographs, my phone was rendered useless for the week.

Camp provided everything we needed – entertainment, food and new friends. We slept in tepees, which accommodated five to six single beds, or smaller yurts that were twins or doubles. They were comfy and cosy, with

bedside tables, lamps, candles, woolly blankets and fruit baskets. The showers were reliable and clean too, complete with 100 per cent natural handmade soap. I was impressed by the food, which was lovingly prepared by Mamma Moon and her small catering team, who sourced local, organic ingredients, including some grown by a nearby school. Meals were abundant and eating was a time of focus and enjoyment, when we all came together.

Making real connections

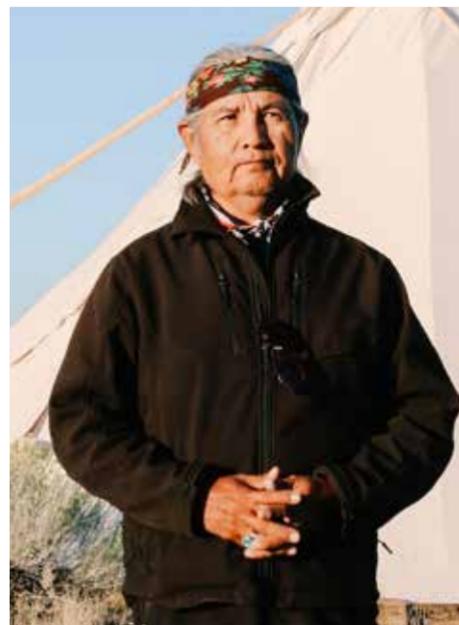
My peers came from around the globe and from all walks of life. The environment we were in – natural, modest and without superficial distractions – provided an even playing field, and Restival created an atmosphere where everyone felt equal. We hardly spoke about our lives back home; instead, the bonds we made were entrenched in the present. Our Navajo friends were welcoming hosts, generous with their time and wisdom. Taking part in ceremonious traditions was a remarkable experience and something for which I shall be forever grateful. We listened to stories around the campfire, were taught how to give thanks and offer blessings, and we sang, danced and celebrated the Harvest Moon, which aptly took place on our final night.

The days were filled with as many or as few activities as we liked. Ancient Navajo traditions, such as peace making, sweat lodges, story telling, mask making and astronomy were woven in with painting, jewellery making and workshops, including 'the art of dreaming', 'the art of stillness' and 'the art of loving'. Exercising the body as well as the mind, daily yoga, gong baths and dance workshops were also on the agenda. And because no eco-luxe retreat would be complete without some pampering, a pop-up spa provided treatments such as Reiki, Thai massage, sound healing and flotation tanks, at an affordable extra cost.

Life can't always be without its responsibilities and constraints, but it was so refreshing to be fully without ties. I revelled in feeling like a child again; laughing, playing and

PREVIOUS PAGE Restival combines the best parts of a retreat and a festival in remote locations around the world. Eva attended the 2016 event in the Arizona Desert.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The camp slept under the stars in tepees and yurts; Restival's activities included painting, astronomy and sweat lodges; Eva found it refreshing to take a break from her life in London; daily yoga was encouraged; the Navajo people were welcoming hosts; greeting the rising sun; inside one of the tepees.



PHOTOGRAPHS: KIKI SUNSHINE; LORD ASHBURY





FROM LEFT Eva basking in the sunshine; the campsite was extremely remote and completely free from technology, with no mobile-phone signal or wi-fi; strong bonds and honest friendships were formed within the camp

not thinking about anything beyond what I was doing in that present moment. I loved the creative-writing workshop, which started with a walking meditation, before returning to the hogan (a traditional Navajo dwelling) to spill our thoughts onto paper and share them with the group. I never enjoyed reading my work aloud at school, but in that instance, I felt comfortable, safe and confident. Sharing was something we did a lot of at Restival, from thoughts and experiences to our creative work. I saw in a whole new light how human connection and the act of sharing could be the most divine forms of emotional nourishment.

At one with nature

One of the most poignant moments for me was taking part in a traditional sweat-lodge ceremony. Twelve girls were ushered into a small, dark hut, which was heated up to 100°C and covered with blankets. A female Navajo, Marilou, led the ceremony with song and prayer, while she tossed dried cedar onto the hot rocks for us to smudge with. We sat for three hours, cocooned in what's known as the earth's womb, bathed in the rich, woody scent, each sharing our stories of gratitude, hope and fear. Long-forgotten memories resurfaced in my mind and, although I was thousands of miles from home, I felt rooted. After four rounds (which got increasingly hotter) I emerged cleansed, re-energised, refocused and very sweaty. I felt an endorphin rush that lingered all day, similar to after an intense workout, and that night I slept like a baby. In fact, I did a lot of sleeping throughout the week. I turned in at around

midnight and woke at 6am to the howling of coyotes. My dreams were vivid and intense, and I felt hungrier for sleep than usual – Caroline had mentioned that this could happen, as the body adjusts to a new state of total relaxation.

The daily schedules were full, but no pressure was put on us to partake in everything, and we were reassured not to feel as though we had to 'rush' around. Some days, I skipped evening yoga altogether to sit and watch the sunset stack before me in elegant layers of pink, purple and blue. I didn't expect Restival to have such an impact on my relationship with the world, but it's the greatest lesson our Navajo hosts taught me. It's hard not to consider what a tiny place you occupy in the world when surrounded by such imposing reminders of nature's power and beauty.

My week in Dinétah filled me with an invigorating sense of humanity and I returned to life in London with what I can only describe as pure sunshine in my heart. Before going, I hadn't quite realised how drastically being constantly plugged in had affected me, (not to mention my attention span). I've since realised that I don't have to be overstimulated and over-scheduled to be productive or successful. I'm far more conscious of the pace at which I choose to live my life now, in order to keep my head and heart balanced. Wellness should not feel like an indulgence, but a necessity, and feeling 'well' – however that looks to you – is your birthright.

For more information and to book for Restival Arizona 2017 (14-19 September), from £1,500 per person, including accommodation, food, drinks, elixirs and workshops (airport transfer \$100), visit restival.global.net