

Buddhist Retreat Centre in Ixopo

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Relax and rediscover an alternative way of being at the BRC

Sitting quietly, in full lotus position, in the midst of a small copse of trees on a 125 hectare country estate near Ixopo in KwaZulu-Natal, you will find a nine by four metre, larger-than-life image of Buddha gazing serenely out over the valley below into indigenous grasslands and misty wattle plantations.

Should you be awake around sunrise you will see a straggling and motley group of up to thirty bleary-eyed and generally work-stressed visitors make their way quietly past the impressive, large white Buddha.

They will be quiet, observing noble silence (often with great difficulty), as they head in the direction of the thatched studio for a morning yoga stretch or a chi kung energising session to start the day.

Unaccustomed to the silence and simplicity - and having time to spend with and on themselves - everyone is withdrawn and introspective.

Those, myself included, who are more addicted to routine (or caffeine) pass via the kitchen and emerge with a steaming cup of tea or coffee before joining in the morning exercise routine, which is followed by a short meditation session in the zendo (meditation hall) and a healthy breakfast - either enjoyed in the dining room, or outside basking in the warmth of the sun while admiring the vista as it becomes increasingly visible through the retreat of the rolling mists.

Like most visitors to the Buddhist Retreat Centre, 90 km south of Pietermaritzburg, these people are not Buddhists, and they are not pursuing any religious instruction - they have travelled into the mist-enshrouded rolling hills of Ixopo to relax and rediscover a different way of being.

Visiting the BRC, as the centre is commonly known, is to take a step into the Buddhist concept of living fully in the moment. Life is simple, and the pace is slow. It is nothing like our hyped-up, high speed, hurry-up-and-wait urban rush. There is little to distract you from being fully aware of everything you think, feel and see.

Removing distractions is part of the reason for the noble silence (also called no-bull silence by those more seriously concerned with experiencing this unusual form of solitude). The BRC staff will tell you that when you stop talking you start to be more aware of your surroundings and what you are thinking and feeling. Your senses tend to open up and compensate for the silence. It's true! I found I heard the birdsong more distinctly, and the beauty of my surroundings took on a richer hue … and I was inclined to reach out and commune with nature in ways I would overlook if left to my normal verbal social meanderings.

Accommodation at the BRC is … well … rather Zen. It is a combination of simplistic and perhaps a little Spartan, from my cosseted city perspective. The closest you come to a modern convenience is a kettle, a fireplace and a library … but, yes, there is electricity and hot and cold running water!

Single or twin rooms offer beds, a simple table and chair, a Japanese-style sumi-e painting on the wall and a vase with flowers or bamboo in it. Showers are shared in the Lodge, or are en suite in the slightly more private New Lodge.

My favourite accommodation option is the Khuti (mountain huts), located near the stupa (round Buddhist monument), a walk of a couple of hundred metres down a forested path from the main centre of the BRC. They offer the same simple type of accommodation, but with greater privacy and stunning views.

The food is lacto-vegetarian, with simple breakfasts and suppers; but lunchtimes offer a gourmet treat for which the BRC has become quietly famous - even producing a popular recipe book, Quiet Food.

Noble silence ends just after breakfast, but generally the induction into living more fully in the present moment, continues.

Interesting and relevant courses are held on most weekends, and increasingly during the week as well. Visitors will generally book to join a retreat that offers something of particular interest to them - electing to learn about yoga, t'ai chi, meditation, the art of Japanese brush painting (sumi-e), relationships, or whatever the focus of the weekend is … or they simply head off to find a quiet spot and do their own thing.

Conducted retreats are structured not only to provide further insights into an alternative way of being, but usually to give you enough free time to interact with the interesting people that a place like the BRC attracts.

There's also time to explore the beautiful gardens, visit the tranquil dam, or sit on the rocks and enjoy the view of the valley below. There's a hidden Zen garden to find, a labyrinth to explore, and for the more energetic, there is a walk down to the river in the valley and back.

Should you need to reconnect with some city urges there's my personal favourite - retail therapy - available in the small shop at the office. It offers a range of clothing, shawls, meditation cushions and stools, incense …

Whenever I need to retreat from the rat race and reconnect with myself, I head off to the BRC. It is life enriching; and no matter how many times I've been I always return home with new lessons to apply to rise above the city stress around me. Contact Details:

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