

# Swear by it

Can saying f\*\*k it really be a spiritual approach to life? **Claire Gillman** defies her swear box and goes on retreat to Italy



**A**s the deadline for this feature loomed over me, I went outside and lay on the grass which, to the idle observer, probably seems like irresponsibility in the extreme. But, as anyone who has been on a F\*\*k It Week knows, some wonderful things can happen when you lie down and do nothing.

As in Taoism, giving up on striving and tension, effectively taking your hands off the steering wheel and seeing where life leads you, is one of the central tenets of the F\*\*k It retreat and, to date, it seems to be working. Not only did this feature get written in record time, but I also witnessed remarkable spiritual transformations in some of my fellow F\*\*k iters during and since my week's stay at The Hill That Breathes in Italy. One girl managed to put her long-held anger and frustration behind her, another is leaving a job she hates, and one of the guys is planning to go off travelling rather than looking for

employment. While most reported more subtle changes, all agreed that the overall experience had been beneficial and, at the very least, had changed the way they viewed their life.

The F\*\*k It Week is based on the philosophies of John Parkin, author of the best-selling book, *F\*\*k It: The Ultimate Spiritual Way*. The course is facilitated by John and his Italian wife Gaia Pollini, both of whom have spent more than 20 years studying meditation, shamanism, breath-work and the eastern philosophies, albeit until eight years ago, while working as advertising executives in London.

It was as a result of their spiritual questioning that John and Gaia came to the conclusion that the process of simplification, neatly summed up by the profanity F\*\*k It, could be a profound spiritual process in itself. Once you realise that things don't matter as much as you think they do, life starts to get interesting (what is, in Buddhist terms, releasing our 'attachments').

Initially, this is quite a nebulous concept to grasp but the week is well-structured with

teaching elements, group exercises and 'sharing' sessions interspersed with plenty of relaxation, so that eventually these hazy ideas become clearer. As the week progresses, you slowly realise the wisdom of not doing what you don't want to and tuning in to what you do really want to do. The problem is that letting go of the things that matter to us, typically things like doing well in our careers, being a good wife/husband/mother/father or finding our purpose, is something that seems hard to relinquish but, as we learnt from John and Gaia, it shouldn't involve too much effort.

## The process

As you might expect from a week with such an evocative title, the pace is slow and relaxed. After a leisurely breakfast, each morning session starts with some gentle Qigong practice. This is the ancient Chinese meditative practice that uses graceful movements and breathing techniques to promote the circulation of qi (energy) in the body. We practiced the eight simple Ba

Duan Jin exercises each day. As the weather was good, we often performed our morning session on the open air platform looking out over the glorious wooded hillside. Much to everyone's delight, in addition to the gentle exercises, we also practised the sitting and laying down Qigong poses, which meant we could all doze blissfully in the warm sunshine.

The rest of the morning session (10am-12pm) and the afternoon session (5pm-7pm) are run inside the startling geodesic dome, which sits like a huge golf ball in the heart of beautiful woodland. It's an amazing, safe space that lends itself to deep and sometimes intimate disclosures but also to wild dancing and joyous movement, especially when John cranks the stereo up loud.

For some of the participants, the tutored exercises where you physically felt the qi energy were a revelation. Gaia had us handling qi like professional basketball players. Mid-week, John powerfully demonstrated how letting go can help you to achieve your goals. Against overwhelming physical odds, he was able to crawl effortlessly to the end of a yoga mat whilst four burly F\*\*kiteers tried to pin down his arms and legs. It was edifying to witness. But seeing is not enough on a F\*\*k It retreat. We were each then schooled in the art of letting go and knowing that it will work and, in small groups, we each crawled to glory. It was a truly remarkable display of the principles of the course in action. Showmanship, I hear the sceptics cry, but for those who were involved, it was compelling, tangible evidence that letting the energy flow can bring astonishing results.

On the penultimate day, we had a full session of breathwork that left some shaken, others elated, and all moved. Gaia led the group with focused breathing techniques to get the qi flowing and to help to take us into a state of Oneness. It was a powerful spiritual practice for the vast majority of the group.

After each tutored session, the participants are helped to ground themselves by tucking into the delicious vegetarian meals, as prepared by resident chef, Bente. The fresh, organic food is locally sourced and plentiful. Regional Italian wine also flows freely in the evenings for those who like to wash down their pasta with something more potent than elderflower cordial (which is also available). This retreat is certainly not for those who favour the hair-shirt and abstinence approach.

## Time out

One of the great delights of a F\*\*k It week is the amount of spare time that is built into each day, so that you can relax in whichever way suits your mood. You can chill by the stunning saltwater pool (cold but refreshing) that looks out over the valley, or book one of the massage therapies that are on offer each day. I chose an energy massage with Tibetan bowls by Patrizia, which was fantastically relaxing and very different, and there are shiatsu and ayurvedic massages also on offer.

The 100-acre hilltop site is threaded with tranquil woodland walks and the gardens and woods are littered with hammocks if you just want to snooze, read a book or indulge in

some quiet, contemplative thought.

One of the highlights of the week was when Gaia invited us to join her for a Chinese tea ceremony. She has learnt the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) effects of the different energies in tea from a Chinese master and she very kindly shared some of this knowledge with us. It was a splendid and very relaxing way to while away a few hours – pointless and pleasant, and thus a perfect F\*\*k It pastime in fact.

Monday is a day off and there are three excursions on offer: a trip into the local town of Urbino (a sleepy university town that is the birthplace of Raphael), a trip to the beach (about 40 minutes away) or a guided mountain hike in the near-by Apennine mountains. I plumped for the latter and had an invigorating day out during which our strenuous endeavours were rewarded by stunning views from the summit down to the gorge below. Our group was rather rowdy so we didn't see a great deal of the local wildlife but these hills teem with deer, wild boar and wild birds (I fib – we did see an eagle courtesy of Barrie's binoculars).

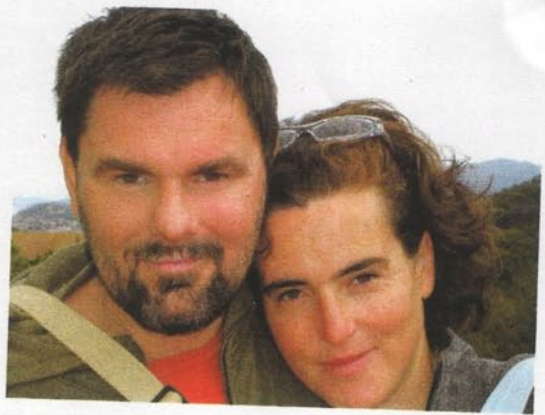
Each night, after the evening meal, the group tends to hang out, chatting or sitting around the camp fire. One of my fondest memories was the table football tournaments that took place each evening. For supposedly chilled-out participants, the competition grew pretty intense as the week went by but it was always fun – a great way for the group to bond and for people to blow off steam after what could be quite profound experiences in the dome earlier in the day.

## Getting results

For traditionalists who like their spiritual retreats to be structured, reverential and guru-led, a F\*\*k It week might at first glance appear spiritually-lite. But I can tell you that, despite the laughter and apparent glibness, a very real spiritual process takes place for the participants in these Marche hills. However, if you are the kind of person who likes to follow 12 steps to achieve a goal, this may not be the retreat for you, since there is no right or wrong answer or reaction – a point that is heavily stressed throughout the week.

I found it refreshing to see so many young participants at this retreat – and a fair representation of men too. Most of my fellow F\*\*kiteers were young professionals who weren't sure why they were dissatisfied with the life they lead. Some were new to spiritual-seeking, others had been on a path of self-development for many years. Perhaps not surprisingly, there were a good number of complementary practitioners among the group and it was commonplace during the afternoon relaxation break to see someone giving reiki to another participant, to catch someone reading the Goddess cards or to over-hear someone giving nutritional advice.

The classic honey-coloured, restored farmhouse in the centre of the site is John and Gaia's home, where they are raising their



John and Gaia run F\*\*k It retreats at their home in Italy.

wonderful eight-year-old twin sons. Together with the family pet cats, the boys' toys and presence are much in evidence throughout the week. The staff feel like family too so it's very easy to relax and feel nurtured in this lovely home environment. It also means there are no 'guru' affectations around John and Gaia and this makes them very open and accessible to all. They are living the F\*\*k It lifestyle and they look good and happy on it.

Their teachings do fly in the face of some received spiritual wisdom but I found it very useful to question things that I had held as sacrosanct for years. The core message is simplicity and replacing the things in your life that you don't like with things that you enjoy.

Of course, not all the messages are ground-breaking. For example, it's not earth-shatteringly original to be told that if we are less mindful about what others think of us, we're happier. The big difference is that although you've heard it before, somehow during a F\*\*k It week, it finally makes sense: you no longer tell yourself that you should care less, you actually are less bothered by what other people think. In their relaxed, irreverent and funny style, John and Gaia actually make you believe and feel things that you have always told yourself were true but never quite completely bought.

I left the week at The Hill That Breathes feeling as though my senses were sharper, as if cataracts had been lifted from my eyes. I was more relaxed, open and willing to listen – to trust the messages that I get. I felt changed. 🌿

## More information

For details of the next F\*\*k It week and the 2010 programme, go to [www.thehillthatbreathes.com](http://www.thehillthatbreathes.com). A F\*\*k It retreat costs 845 euros per person (this does not include getting to The Hill but includes all teaching, accommodation and three meals a day). Supplements for single or en-suite rooms apply. The new book by John C Parkin and Gaia Pollini, entitled *The way of f\*\*k it* (Hay House, £6.99) was published last November. John's earlier book *F\*\*k It: the ultimate spiritual way* (Hay House, £8.99) is still available.