

SUSSEX LIFE

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SEPTEMBER 2023

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The Beatle
behind the lens



Joan
Collins
'I never thought I
was good looking'



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left:

The retreat is set in bucolic Sussex countryside

The MOTHER of all MINI BREAKS in Sussex

Promising yoga, transformative treatments and sleep, a mother-and-baby retreat in Etchingham was impossible to resist for one exhausted mum

WORDS: Nione Meakin

It's no secret that parenthood can be a bit of a slog. So, when I was invited to Soul Sanctum, a three-night retreat in Etchingham just for mums, my immediate response was a hard yes. With a five-year-old daughter and an 18-month-old son, a stint of uninterrupted kip is rare and visions of deep sleep in a plump bed shimmered like a mirage before me. But there was a small catch: I was supposed to bring the baby with me.

My son Ezra's main hobbies are climbing, hitting things with sticks, and locating electrical outlets into which he can stick his fingers. So, on our way, I admit to being a touch sceptical about just how restorative our mini-break together would prove to be.

Our base for the weekend was New House Farm, a collection of converted barns and stables clustered around a handsome Grade II-listed farmhouse. Our lodge overlooked the outdoor pool and offered a wood-burning stove, roll-top bath (plus wet room) and well-equipped kitchen. As I collapsed onto

the sofa and Ezra embarked on a thorough testing of the shower screen safety glass, Soul Sanctum founder Alix Wenmouth popped over to greet us.

Dressed in a striking tartan cape with her black hair tied back, it isn't hard to imagine Alix as the rock 'n' roll music publicist she once was. But, she explained, her life took a new direction when she became pregnant with daughter Lyra in 2018. Noticing a desire to be closer to nature, she moved back from London to Sussex, where she grew up.

As she struggled to adjust to the challenges of new motherhood, Alix found herself longing to return to her previous yoga practice and started looking for a mother-and-child retreat within the UK that she could attend with Lyra. To her surprise there wasn't one. She found Claudia Spahr's Holy Mama retreat in Ibiza, Spain, however. The retreat focused on nurturing women and their children and proved so 'transformative' Alix later decided to join Claudia's mentorship programme in order to bring something >

**left:**

Alix started the retreat when she couldn't find one in Britain after having her daughter.

Photo: Charlotte Patmore

below:

Brydie Rowan, Alix Wenmouth and Sharon Smith.

Photo: Charlotte Patmore



similar to the UK. 'I created Soul Sanctum in the vision of what I craved for myself as a mother,' Alix said. 'On the surface, we have a holistically inspired schedule of things for mums to do by themselves in the mornings and with their children in the afternoons. But underpinning that is a sense of community and an invitation to experience a different way of living.'

I found out just what she meant about community shortly after our meeting, when dinner was served in the farmhouse kitchen amid a cacophony of laughter, clattering cutlery and the scraping of chairs being rearranged. The 11 of us may have been total strangers but the atmosphere was one of a homecoming as cook Sharon Smith plied us with huge plates of homemade veggie lasagne accompanied by garlic bread and big bowls of salad. The children – who ranged in age from 10 months to five-year-olds – happily gobbled up their portions while any shyness we mums may have felt swiftly dissipated as wet wipes were passed around and dropped crayons retrieved. In the sitting room after dinner the conversations continued until

one by one, we wrangled our children off for baths and bed.

The next morning, after a surprisingly sound sleep, Ezra and I wandered back to the kitchen where Sharon was serving a delicious breakfast. I went for the carrot cake overnight oats – a delightfully healthy alternative to my usual snatched piece of toast and shot of coffee – while Ezra ate a huge bowl of Weetabix then squashed a banana into the table. I asked for a cloth to clean up but was shooed away; 'We're here to look after you,' Sharon reminded me with a grin.

'I went for the carrot cake overnight oats – a delightfully healthy alternative'

Then it was time to drop Ezra over to the on-site childcare team. I'd filled out an in-depth form beforehand about his likes (snacks; loud toys; open doors) and dislikes (sleeping; nappy changes; suspicious vegetables) which meant the handover was a breeze. Perhaps I should have felt more anxiety at our temporary parting but instead

I practically skipped over to the Long Barn where we mums were to meet, filled with lightness at the prospect of a few hours of free time.

The atmosphere in the barn was that of a chic coven, sage burning in a bowl (the herb is meant to get rid of bad energy and 'cleanse' the air) and an elaborate arrangement of plants and grasses laid out in a circle formation across the hard stone floor. As we all settled down around it, I wondered if I'd stumbled into some kind of Mums Anonymous meeting. Yet it wasn't long before

the awkwardness gave way to something more profound as we took it in turns to share our reasons for being here. There were women pregnant with second children anxious about if their relationship with their first child was going to change; mums with high-profile careers wondering how they could better balance their work and their personal lives; >

right:

The rooms are all luxurious.

Photo: Charlotte Patmore

below:

Mums get to relax with their children.

Photo: Alice Rose



others grappling with the loss of their own parents. Most of us wanted to be more present with our kids. Some of us (okay, me) just wanted a nice sleep, a massage and dinner cooked by someone else.

Then it was time to shake it off with a yoga session led by Brydie Rowan, a trained pregnancy and postnatal yoga teacher. Yoga isn't everyone's cup of tea, and one mum admitted she actively hated it usually. But Brydie's down-to-earth warmth and ability to adapt poses to accommodate even the

feeling considerably less frazzled than usual. Then, after a wander in the bucolic scenery that surrounds the farm, where Ezra attempted a vigorous cuddle with one of the resident llamas, we made our way back to the kitchen for our evening meal, a fragrant vegetable curry with jasmine rice.

Once Ezra was (eventually) asleep I could have taken the opportunity for an evening gong bath – essentially a lovely lie-down while you listen to soothing music – in the Long Barn. Soul Sanctum offers a listening

Sunday roast, we stowed the kids in our rooms once again before meeting for our final evening circle. By that point it seemed we mums had known each other for far longer than a few days. The village it supposedly takes to raise a child had been assembled and most of us were reluctant to leave. It turned out that it was possible to relax, even with a child in tow, when surrounded by supportive women.

Did I really have to return to the chaos and squashed bananas of my normal life? Sadly, I did. 'But my hope,' explains Alix, 'is that mums can incorporate their retreat experience into their daily lives. When mum's cup is full, she is much more able to fill everyone else's.' I'll raise a glass of green smoothie to that. ●

STAYING THERE: Choose between a four-night mid-week or a three-night weekend retreat. Prices for mama and child start at £1,500 including morning childcare, yoga, a complimentary treatment, afternoon activities such as yoga, crafts and foraging, an evening listening service for sleeping children, plus three plant-based meals a day (dairy milk and cheese are also available and all stages of weaning are catered for.) Retreats for children aged 0-seven and five-11. soulsanctumretreats.com

'Did I really have to return to the chaos and squashed bananas of my normal life?'

heavily pregnant soon had us all downward-dogging with a smile on our faces.

When the class ended, lots of mums stayed to chat further, fuelled by a delivery of green smoothies from the kitchen (delicious). Others, like me, headed off for treatments that ranged from massage to more esoteric energy-balancing techniques such as chakra-cleansing. While I'm still not entirely sure what chakras actually are, it turned out mine were a little off-balance, so I submitted to some spiritual fine-tuning by Sandra Gorman from Wadhurst massage and therapy centre Shhh Holistic.

Despite my scepticism, I can't deny that I returned to collect Ezra from childcare

service that means mums can sneak out after bedtime. But following a standard bubble bath, I fell into a deep sleep with Ezra snuggled up beside me.

The final day began with a morning yoga session with Brydie then later, a gentle parent-and-child craft session in another luxe outbuilding. While I probably enjoyed the crafting more than my boisterous son, there was no questioning his enthusiasm for the yoga session that followed; once he had discovered the tutor's 'singing' bowl instrument, he and another toddler practically had to be wrenched out.

After more sunny rambling into the countryside and a spectacular vegetarian