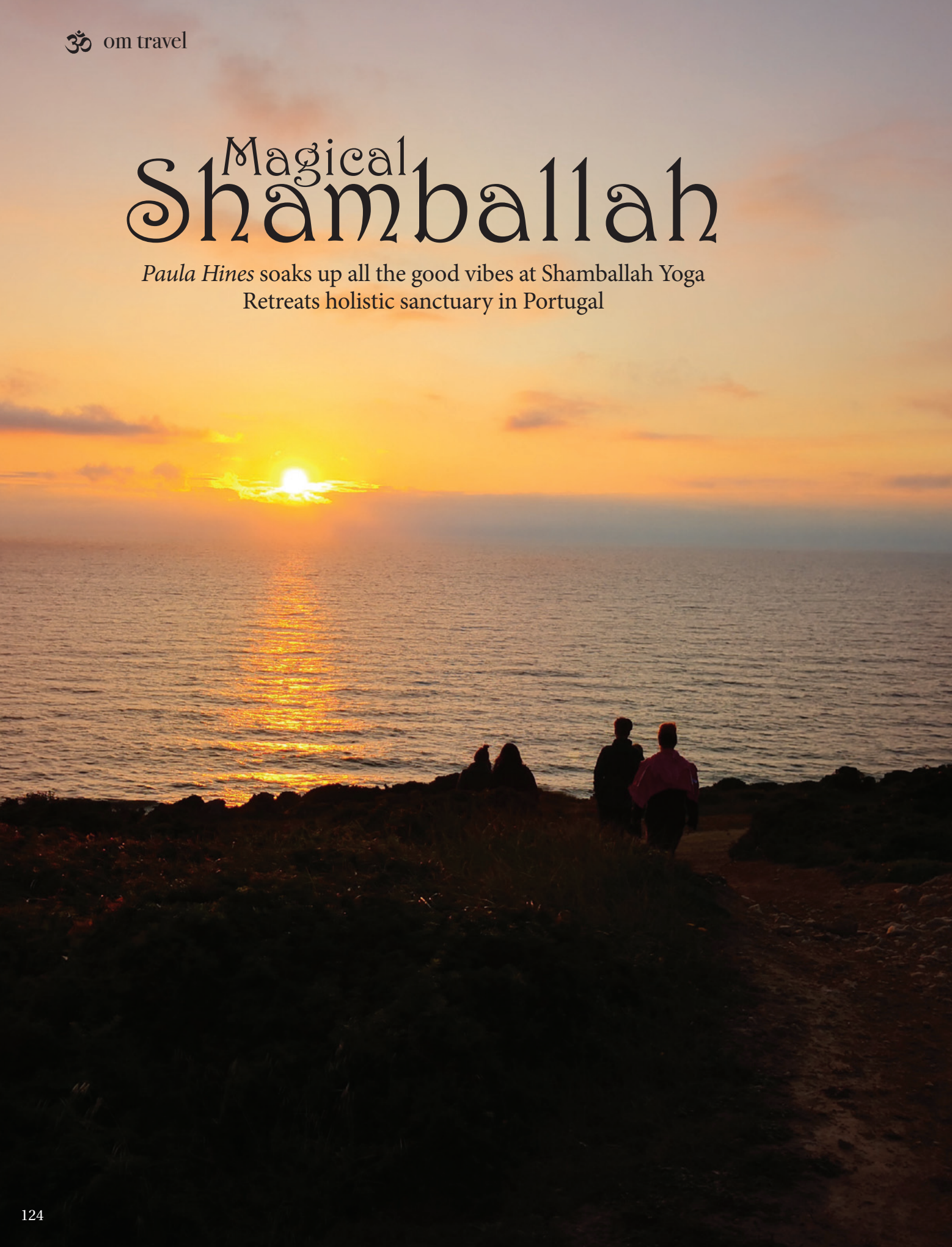
Magical Shamballah

Paula Hines soaks up all the good vibes at Shamballah Yoga Retreats holistic sanctuary in Portugal



Located in Fontanelas in Sintra, about 45 minutes from Lisbon on the coast, Shamballah Yoga Retreats is a welcoming holistic sanctuary run by Portuguese natives, Patricia Graca and Zarqa Correa.

The beautiful, light-filled house – which is also Patricia and Zarqa's home – is just 15 minutes walk from the beach and the soothing sounds of the Atlantic Ocean. (A walk to the cliffs to watch the sunset here is highly recommended.) The area is a popular surfing spot, something that soon becomes evident once you visit the beach and the breath-taking coastline. If you are keen to get out there in the surf too, then lessons can be arranged for you during your stay.

The accommodation is very welcoming, light, airy and comfortable. Downstairs is the well-equipped yoga space with floor-to-ceiling windows, as well as the dining area. Upstairs is one larger bedroom with four beds plus a shared bathroom, and two twin rooms are located on the other side of the landing with another shared bathroom. Lounge areas on both the ground and first floors, the latter leading to a sunny veranda, provide perfect spots to curl up and read, chat or rest. And there's a mini-gym area too.

Yoga for all, and meditation too

During our stay, we had two yoga classes a day, one each morning before breakfast and another in the early evening pre-dinner, all taught by Patricia. The yoga was very inclusive at a nice, steady pace and beginner friendly. Patricia takes into account any injuries you might have, and in the case of our group that meant a combination of back and knee injures as well as one person who did all classes with the aid of a chair.

Over the course of the week, each class focused on a particular chakra, working from the root up. Along the way, Patricia interweaved yoga philosophy and some Traditional Chinese Medicine meridian theory. I really enjoyed the use of essential oils within the practice and how a different oil was introduced at every class for those who wished to try them. Patricia also gave me an essential oils tutorial session as I was keen to learn more – this is an optional activity you can book during your visit.

After dinner each evening was an hour of meditation with Zarqa. It was great to have so much time and emphasis on meditation during the retreat. Zarqa shared his knowledge with us, leading us through several different practices along with some pranayama and it was enjoyable to be introduced to some practices I had not tried before.

A special mission to welcome everyone

Patricia and Zarqa also make a brilliant team. They have lived in meditation schools (where they met) for several years each and have 20 years' experience of practicing and teaching mind body practices. Zarqa said of Shamballah: "Our mission is to create a centre for healing, education, the evolution of human consciousness – all the practices that heal body and mind. To help people create healthy habits in a warm and friendly environment."

It is clear that they walk their talk, and with their authentic offerings to their guests, Zarqa and Patricia are certainly on their way to achieving their mission. In the year since launching, they

have attracted visitors of all ages and backgrounds from across the globe and gained some impressive testimonials. During my stay our nationalities ranged from British, Dutch, American and Danish. It was also notable that we all happened to be solo travellers and that we all felt very safe there.

There was plenty of laughter at mealtimes – dinner times especially, when Patricia and Zarqa ate with us. The home-prepared vegetarian food was delicious, plentiful and prepared with great care and attention; any special dietary requirements can be catered for.

Tailor your stay

At Shamballah there are a wide range of activities to choose from, so you really are able to tailor your stay by doing as much or as little as you wish. It is worth noting that there are different retreat packages available including: Yoga and Meditation, Yoga, Mediation and Surfing, and Yoga and Coaching. I was there for Yoga and Meditation, but one of my fellow guests had booked coaching, which they really enjoyed.

After morning yoga and breakfast the day is your own to do as you please. A different packed lunch was prepared for us each day, which was great because it meant that if you did plan to go out there was never a risk of missing out on lunch.

If staying in and relaxing is more your thing, then there are a range of treatments and activities on offer, including Zen Shiatsu, Ayurvedic and AromaTouch massages offered by Patricia and Zarqa. (I experienced a fantastic Reiki session with Patricia).

And just a few of the numerous activities to choose from include a Healing Sound Bath, Forest Therapy (based on Shinrin-Yoku – the Japanese practice of forest bathing) and guided walks – Sintra's national park is perfect for long walks and getting in touch with nature.

If sightseeing is for you, then there are lots of options too. One day, along with a few of my fellow guests I visited the picturesque Quinta da Regaleira. This impressive early twentieth century estate with its mythical initiation well, secret tunnels, towers and lush gardens, reminiscent of fairy-tale gothic castles is a World Heritage Site as classified by UNESCO.

More sightseeing opportunities include the Moorish Castle, dating back to the eighth century, as well as the Pena and Monserrate Palaces, so you'll never be short of things to do.

My week at Shamballah had a wonderful lasting impact long after returning home. I wanted space and stillness for some much-needed reflection. I got all of this and more. If you are looking for a welcoming, fun, nurturing yoga break, with the chance to be close to nature then I would highly recommend a visit to Shamballah. ॐ

Find out more at: shamballahretreats.com