

## Embracing accident: How an art retreat holiday helped ease my anxiety



**Art is now a common form of therapy used everywhere from mental health hospitals to wellbeing charity programmes.**

When I leave London in early December, there's a damp chill in the air that seems to penetrate right through my heavy coat. As someone who suffers from seasonal affective disorder (SAD), the onset of winter is always a tricky time.

So when I step off the plane on the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia to be hit with a wall of warm, humid air and the earthy smell of rain-drenched vegetation, my mind feels immediately lighter.

I haven't come to the holiday hotspot just for a bit of winter sun, however. To really quash my seasonal descent into depression and anxiety, I'm joining an art retreat at beachside resort StolenTime by Rendezvous.

## How can art benefit mental health?

According to a **report** by the World Health Organisation (WHO) published in 2019, results from over 3000 studies identified a “major role for the arts in the prevention of ill health, promotion of health, and management and treatment of illness across the lifespan.”

**Art** is now a common form of therapy used everywhere from mental health hospitals to wellbeing charity programmes.

At StolenTime, London-based **artist** Venetia Berry is leading our sessions. Different activities promise to help us rekindle our imagination, free our minds from expectations and embrace chance.

## Why should you go on an art retreat?

Berry begins our first lesson by asking us to close our eyes, imagine a square and then trace its outline in time to slow breaths. It helps dampen the busy thoughts and focus my mind on something less complicated and more concrete.

Then, Berry shows us how we are going to paint a ‘whimsical landscape’ to help us connect with our **creativity**.

I'm immediately drawn to the giant, gnarled Samaan tree outside - which is reportedly over 150 years old - and the broad, lime-green leaves of thick foliage that make the resort feel half-hidden in jungle.



I add a figure doing **yoga** - I attended a dreamy beachside session that morning - and a stretching cat as an ode to Bubbles, the hotel's resident feline.

Berry asks us to steer clear of realistic colours, so my tree becomes purple for the inky sky when we arrived the night before and the ground becomes the bright turquoise of the **Caribbean** sea.

The first lesson has felt freeing; Berry doesn't let us erase anything and encourages us to plunge in without fearing mistakes.

## Where is the best art retreat?

The **Caribbean** lends itself as a location for mental well-being improvement. Warm weather draws you out into the fresh air while the short-lived but heavy rain showers have a therapeutic sense of release.

At night, the air is filled with chirping and squawking from birds and frogs, and the rhythmic surf of the sea is surprisingly somniferous.



Adults-only StolenTime - which bills itself as a **wellness** resort letting guests escape from the pressures of the modern-day world - encourages early rising with **beach** walks, bike rides to the Saturday market, fitness classes with ex-Olympians and sunrise meditation.

It doesn't go so far down the wholesome route to become completely ascetic, however.

There's a bubbly hour every evening, two pages worth of rum cocktails on the drinks menus, a toes-in-the-sand restaurant with Creole-infused dishes and live music in the evenings (though only till 11 pm lest guests miss their morning yoga).

There's also much beyond the resort's boundaries by way of salubrious activities. Climbing the UNESCO-designated Gros Piton is a spectacular two-hour toil up a rocky ascent.



The path is crowded with cacti, palms and giant gumbo-limbo **trees** whose peeling red bark so resembles sunburnt skin it has earned the crushing nickname of 'tourist tree'.

Nearby, there are **volcanic** sulphurous mudbaths for glowing skin and waterfalls for circulation-boosting cold plunges.

The more hedonistic can dance away their cares at the Friday Night Street Party in Gros Islet where a colossal sound system pumps out reggae and the streets are a haze of smoke from open-air grills.

## Related

Want a free stay on a Caribbean island? Aruba is looking for a resident weather watcher >

'We bought an island': How investors took over a plot in the Caribbean to create a micronation >

Back at the resort, our subsequent **art** sessions push us to be more abstract, with a nod to Matisse's late-life obsession with paper cut-outs and Berry's own undulating, female-body-inspired artworks.

Relinquishing control and embracing accident is a challenging but powerful practice to ease anxiety.

"Nothing will ever come out exactly as you expect it," Berry says, referring to our artworks but perhaps also to life in general. "I'm never fully satisfied with my work, which is why I keep creating."