

CARIBBEAN

I've tried every type of wellness holiday — this one beats the lot

A direct nine-hour flight, a magical Caribbean island and a beginner's course in t'ai chi was the mind and body fix this stressed-out writer has been searching for



Edwin leads the t'ai chi classes at StolenTimes

In my quest to relax and recharge fast, I've tried everything from hydrotherapy and colonic irrigation (once was enough) to having my limbs manipulated in floatation tanks. I've shouted at gongs to release my inner child and done yoga in a sacred wood at sunrise. But I've realised what I really need is something less demanding: an old-fashioned holiday with wellness benefits.

I've come to realise that, for me at least, wellness begins with balmy weather, jade green sea, not doing a great deal — *certainly* not signing up for a packed itinerary of healthy activities — and a flight of no longer than nine hours to get there.

At this time of year, that means the Caribbean. So when my husband announced he wouldn't mind learning t'ai chi, if that counted as wellness (it does), I opted for StolenTime in the north of St Lucia, which, unlike many resorts, offers classes.



StolenTime began life as the Malabar Beach Hotel in the Sixties before morphing, via the couples holiday retreat Rendezvous, into its present incarnation, so it's an established hotel with added wellness, not a destination spa, and this is crucial to its appeal.

You get the classic Caribbean hotel set-up: milk-filled coconut delivered to your sunlounger; a pretty swimming pool with a swim-up bar under a white wooden pagoda (which made me think of Mrs Robinson in *The Graduate*); a two-mile stretch of palm-fringed beach with two bays — one where you'll find the waterskiing boat and catamarans, and the other where you'll find nothing much unless it's a guest or two bobbing in the water or the local kids cooling off their skinny ponies in the shallows.

You might hear *Don't Worry Be Happy* playing on the steel drums over the sound system in the terrace restaurant, but never so loud that it drowns out the birdsong. And on a Friday night the tables are transplanted to a stretch of sand for a beach barbecue with limbo dancing as entertainment. It's old-school Caribbean and heaven for a mostly middle-aged British crowd plus a few Americans; the odd mother and daughter on a spa break and a few honeymoon couples who stood out a mile, and not just because of their petal-strewn breakfast table.



On top of that you get a spa amid the mango trees with an inky blue pool concealed by dense, jungly foliage, plus stretch classes on the sand, yoga and Pilates in the beach studio, aqua aerobics in the pool, morning meditation in the rotunda facing the sea, and the t'ai chi that we've come for.

There's no pressure to sign up. A blackboard relays what's on each day; generally about 20 activities, from beach cricket and archery to sunrise meditation. While we're on the subject of extras, *everything* at StolenTime is included, apart from the spa treatments. You can learn to dive, take tennis lessons with a pro, try paddleboarding, windsurfing, waterskiing or drink the bar dry if you feel so inclined, all at no extra charge. This policy works very well as an additional aid to genuine relaxation — you won't be sweating as the bill arrives. That said, it's worth forking out the £83 for a Balinese massage in the spa from Leona; there's nothing laid-back about her knot-pummelling technique.

Our first t'ai chi class is in the beach studio. The Chinese martial art is designed to work on co-ordination, flexibility, balance and strength. Along with qigong, it's gaining traction in the West in the way that yoga did 20 years ago, especially among those of us who are not so much interested in firming our buttocks as combating the effects of ageing.



Edwin, a St Lucian who has also curated t'ai chi programmes at StolenTimes's sister resort, the energetic Body Holiday, is the ideal teacher: gentle, patient and quietly awesome. He combines qigong (exercises to relax the body) with meditative t'ai chi, the discipline's slowed-down version.

I am easily bored by exercise, but the ultra slow-motion movements and the focus on breath and balance is wholly absorbing. The flowing, balletic exercises have descriptive names, such as "clearing the clouds" and "rowing the boat on the lake", which give the experience a mystical quality. Soon I find my mind is clearing and I can balance easily on one leg (something I always found hard in yoga). Afterwards we can feel the effect both on our muscles — it's as if we've been working out with 10kg weights — and our mood.

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And it's powerful in another way. In our next class Edwin speeds up an exercise called "brush and push" (a sweeping-rocking motion) and suddenly turns into Bruce Lee, his soft pushing palm transformed into a blocking tool and his other hand poised to attack. However, rather than turning us into the kind of people who would step in to break up a bar fight, Edwin is more concerned with making us mentally strong, more focused and less stressed. And it's true that when we follow his softly spoken instructions, breathe exactly when he breathes and move exactly as he moves, we reach an almost meditative state. His parting shot is that t'ai chi will soothe our minds to the point where we'll give up our place in the bank queue to the fretting lady ten people behind, as he had that morning. My husband can't quite picture himself going that far, but we're hooked.



It helps that the t'ai chi studio is at the far end of the beach, just beyond a stretch of pretty turquoise cottages with white verandahs trimmed with lace ironwork, a coconut's lob from the sea. If you stay in one of these you can slide back your window and feel like you're on a private island looking out to the ocean (so one of the very happy occupants informed me). Our room was in the "premium verandah" category — light and bright with a garden view, but less atmospheric. Being behind the spa and without the beach view it is cheaper (about £700 per night all-inclusive, compared with £955), but I'd definitely go for a cottage next time.



Whatever room you stay in you will see surprisingly little of your fellow guests. A big plus of this resort is its scale. There are just 100 rooms spread across five acres, and you never feel on top of anyone, partly because of the long beachfront and the careful, dense landscaping. That the hotel feels so divorced from the rest of the world is all the more impressive because it's right on the fringes of the port of Castries, a regular stop on cruise itineraries. You can go into town, but if you want lush green scenery or the famous Pitons, it's a journey to the south. So if your time is limited, as ours was, you'll probably opt to stay put.

If you are looking for a hushed, brushed, Maldives-style beach resort, StolenTime might not be the place. Calorie-counters will also have their work cut out: lunch is an all-you-can-eat buffet, and the best of the three restaurants is the 14-table Malabar Beach, where you're encouraged to kick off your shoes and eat catch of the day and tuna tartare with the sand between your toes. But for unfussy, unpretentious R&R, good-humoured staff and old-fashioned Caribbean charm with a restorative dollop of wellness, you can't beat it.

Shane Watson was a guest of StolenTime. One night's all-inclusive from £703 (stolentime.com). Fly to St Lucia. Seven nights all-inclusive from £2,269pp, including flights (kuoni.co.uk)