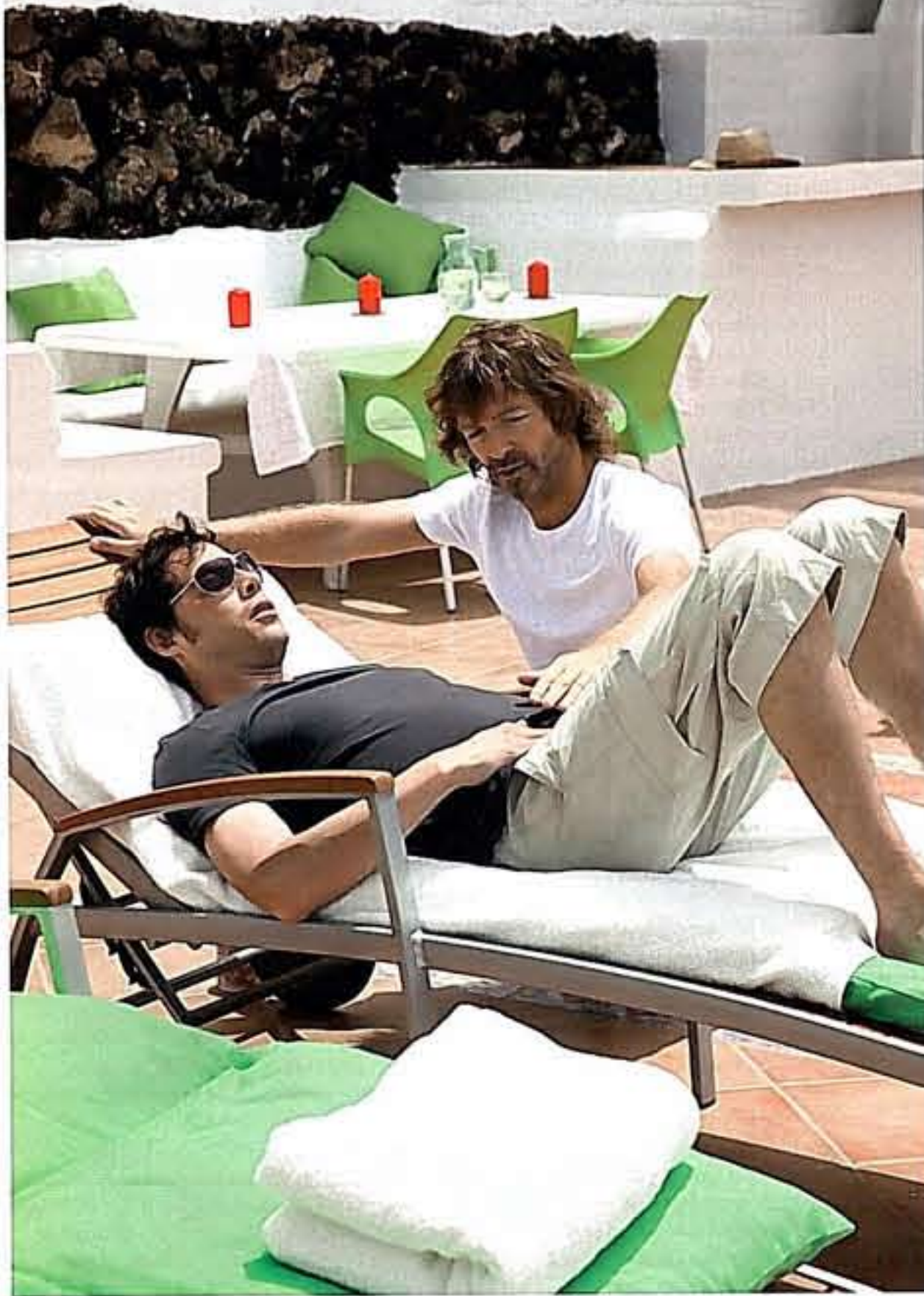


SOMETIMES people meeting you at the airport hold up cardboard signs with your name written on them. Sometimes they scan the incoming passengers as if eyes locking will trigger recognition. In the arrivals lounge at Lanzarote, nobody appeared to be looking for me at all.

When I finally saw who I thought might be meeting me – who knows what a Transformational Breath Facilitator looks like? – he was sitting quietly with his head down in a book called *The Twelfth Planet*, unconcerned by (and somehow unconnected to) the milling crowds of the airport. Dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, he was wiry and fit with the kind of shaggy surfer's hair favoured by Patrick Swayze in *Point Break*. As I approached tentatively, he looked up and smiled with complete confidence that it would be me. For the Spiritually Secure, what is meant to be will be; those they are ordained to meet will find them.

Although Alan Dolan operates out of London, Dublin and Glasgow as well, his preferred forum for the benefits he believes that Transformational Breathing bring is the island of Lanzarote, where he lives. In one of the e-mails we had exchanged, he referred to it as the 'Magic Island', although I wondered if the magic might be of the black variety, as the view is dominated by volcanoes and the grey rocky lava that covers the island; although in March, when I was there, a thin coating of green was clinging insecurely to the ground, waiting for the summer heat to destroy it and return the land to a stark desert. It has a curious quality of seeming both post-apocalyptic and primeval at the same time: not for nothing was the Raquel Welch film *One Million Years BC* shot on Lanzarote. It's an uncompromising terrain, pared down to basics and devoid of anything frivolous or pretty, which might be as good a metaphor as any for the Inner Spirit that Transformational Breathing is said to connect to. ➤

Alan Dolan, a Transformational Breath Facilitator, helps a client to inhale on Lanzarote



TAKE A VERY DEEP BREATH

LANZAROTE Transformational Breathing is as easy as, well, breathing; but it can help change your life and banish pain. Charles Elton takes the air on holiday in the Canaries. Photographs by Juliette Neel

➤ Alan, and the relatively few 'Breath Facilitators' in the UK (around 10, he told me) have all trained with Dr Judith Kravitz in the USA. Although different methods of breathing are integral to yoga and other alternative therapies, she is the pioneer of this particular style ('The Cutting Edge of Breathwork') which makes such expansive claims – 'To increase personal joy and global peace,' for instance, and 'To resolve past trauma and find emotional freedom' – that you'd expect queues around the block. Her website offers a schedule for a tour of inspirational evenings ('Reclaim Your Superpowers'), celebrity endorsements from Deepak Chopra and Goldie Hawn and a Mamet-ian emphasis on the hard-sell ('Free Tele-Seminar Series'). Indeed, Alan told me that Les Elms, another Breath Facilitator staying with us on Lanzarote, is based in Devon and 'covers the South-West', as if the salesmen from *Glen Gary Glen Ross* have gone spiritual.

The one thing that almost anyone who has heard a little about Transformational Breathing will tell you is that Dr Kravitz famously 'cured' her own throat cancer and while Alan told me there is empirical evidence that cancer cells cannot survive in oxygen – or 'Oxygen Kills Cancer' as the *Sunday Express* baldly put it in an article last year – he is refreshingly circumspect about the wilder edges of some of the claims.

If pressed, he will describe some of the experiences other people have had. He told me of one guest at his villa who, at the end of his last breathing session, saw in the room three 'guides' or 'spirits' – even Alan was unsure how to describe them – who told the guest that he ought to have more sessions. Just as he was about to cancel his air ticket home and stay for an extra day the airline called to say his flight had been delayed for 24 hours. Alan leaves you to take this tale of spiritual serendipity as you will, but said that other people had experienced visions of a similar nature. Reassuringly, he said that these sightings tend to be what he called 'in the paradigm' – that is, if you are Catholic, say, your vision would be of a priest rather than a Buddhist monk or a Native American shaman, or it could be a loved one such as a grandmother.

Other people, during a session, have felt themselves re-experiencing their own birth – cells, Alan told me, have memories that can be stimulated by the aggressive influx of oxygen into the body – and may feel pain in their head where it was held



Alan Dolan with his dog, Louis. Top, the volcanic landscape of Lanzarote's north coast

tightly by the midwife or doctor. Occasionally he has seen red forceps marks appearing on the forehead if the client's birth had been a particularly difficult one.

What Transformational Breathing is all about is the release of pain: from simple stress at one end to physical, spiritual or emotional anguish at the other. It often takes several sessions for any benefit to be felt and Alan is honest enough to point out that there are no guarantees or certainties: that it can work in a variety of different ways for different people. All he offers is his own belief in the process and how it changed his life: he had been a high-flyer in the aerospace industry, running his own successful company in

Riyadh, when he had a Damascene conversion that led him to turn his back on the conventional world of business and begin an indefinable quest that eventually led him to Transformational Breathing and his home in Lanzarote.

Alan lives with his dog, Louis, in what he describes as 'The Boonies', a village called Soo on the north side of the island far away from package tours and hotels. His villa is, in common with almost every other building on the island, a low, glaringly white structure on which he generously bestows an architectural style – Cubist – which is accurate only in the broadest sense of the word in that all the buildings are box-like. Despite the modernity of most of the village buildings they seem like only the thinnest veneer over the unchanging life of the inhabitants. Alan is next door to a goat farm, and some of his neighbours wear traditional costumes – the women often in pointed bonnets that gives them a curiously Amish appearance. The view is of the sea and low plains, dominated, like everything on the island, by the volcanoes and the black lava on their slopes.

Around Alan, the default position tends to be the spiritual. The bookshelves are filled with a comprehensive library of books on enlightenment of one sort or another – not just the usual suspects such as Deepak Chopra and Eckhart Tolle, but also Carl Jung and Richard Dawkins. Even Jill, who comes to clean the house, is a part-time yoga teacher although – as part of that portmanteau life that many ex-pats lead – she also does PR for Titti Trollopes, a transvestite cabaret in the neighbouring town of Puerto del Carmen.

It would be pretentious to describe what Alan offers as a 'Residential Course' with its implications of structure and organisation. It is just him, and you take from it what he has to offer – which is refreshingly uncompromising in its simplicity. He only has rooms for three or four people, or he can arrange for you to stay in a 'luxury villa' nearby. But this is not really the kind of trip for those who are looking for luxury as it is commonly defined: white towelling robes, say, or marble fittings in the bathroom or expensive chocolates placed on turned-down beds at night by silent staff.

Alan's villa is basic but comfortable. Like the landscape, everything is pared down to basics. In the evenings Alan might cook, but the first evening I was there one of my fellow guests prepared a simple meal. On other nights we went ➤

➤ out to restaurants with kitchens behind the bar where you eat fresh fish under the punishing light of neon strips. Lunch tends to be whatever is in the fridge, or the leftovers from the previous night.

Staying in the villa were Bex, who worked in television but really wanted to be a yoga teacher, Chrissy, who took lucrative short-term contracts as a software tester to leave much of the year free for travelling, and a young married couple, Rav and Pardeep, who were so into the concept of healthy minds and bodies that they had just organised a punishing home detox for themselves in preparation for their stay at Alan's. For all of them, Transformational Breathing is not a finite experience in itself, like a massage or a holiday, but just one stop on a continuous journey of enlightenment, so the talk at meals tended towards that particular intersection where the physical and the spiritual cross. As if they had all been to a hypermarket of spiritual healing, their baskets were filled with a consistent but variable selection of products and most of them were checked off as we talked: Yoga, Chakra, the Third Eye, Angelic Energy, Prana, Chi. Very little personal information as it is usually defined – marital status, size of mortgage, golf handicap – was shared but that was only because, among this particular group of people, the spiritual was the personal.

For someone not on any kind of quest for enlightenment, I found it curiously one-note at first, but by the end of the first evening I found myself more interested in this group of strangers than those I might meet at a more conventional dinner where the talk might be of children and schools, who is sleeping with who, and whether the new Martin Amis is a return to form. Around Alan's dinner table, with his dog, Louis, lying quietly beside us, a conversation about the benefits of a sesame-oil colonic begins to seem more focused and connected to life than it might in other circumstances.

My first breathing session was the morning after my arrival. There's a certain amount of preparation first – candles lit, dry sage leaves burning in a bowl to provide what Alan calls 'an energetic vacuum cleaner'. The space – in my case, a spare bedroom – must be 'clean.' I lay down on the bed, my back propped up against pillows, and Alan sat on a chair

beside me. He explained that, generally, we use only about 30 per cent of our respiratory system because we tend to only breathe into the upper chest. The point is to utilise the whole system: 'When you breathe fully, it completely rocks.' The technique seems very simple at first. Breathing through your open mouth, you take breaths deep into the stomach. You inhale slowly and then exhale quickly, but



I don't know what exactly was departing my body, but it was certainly drained of something: I wanted to curl up in a ball

the point is to never let the rhythm stop, to keep breathing in that way as long as you can. You could do this on your own – as many do – but having Alan there made me realise why people have personal trainers: it helps you focus, and stops you giving up at the first hurdle.

It's harder than it sounds just to keep breathing, but Alan orchestrates the process. He speaks in a low voice as your proxy – 'It is safe to be in my body. It is safe to breathe' – and, as if you are hooked up to some kind of spiritual monitor, he has his hand on your stomach to let you feel how your abdominal muscles are expanding and contracting as the breaths go in and he does some light acupressure, finding

and massaging the points where there is tension, the points, he says, where the pain – physical or emotional or both – is being released, where everything that has been built up is leaving the body.

Even for one not on any kind of quest, spiritual or otherwise, it is a viscerally intense and physical experience. I don't know what exactly was departing my body, but it was certainly drained of

something: my limbs tingled almost painfully; I shook; I wanted to curl up in a ball. At the end of the session, Alan put a blanket over me and left me to rest for half an hour. I felt shaky when I got up, but also curiously serene. In the other five sessions I had, the physical effects were slightly different, but no less intense. Like a massage to relieve a bad back, you want to know how many sessions it will 'take', but Alan offers no more than to say 'It will lead you in bite-size pieces to the mother lode.'

The physical is easy to quantify, the spiritual harder. In the stillness and warmth of Alan's personality, in the quiet hum of meal-time debates under the dramatic landscape that constantly changes in different lights, it's not difficult to feel a sense of well-being. Curiously, the most benign presence in the household was Louis, Alan's Spanish water dog, who never seemed to bark and just observed us all quietly with a

quizzical expression on his face. Rescued from a roadside when he was about six months old, he is the most serene dog I've ever met, as if he has taken a little piece of spirit from everyone who has passed through and made it his own. Or maybe it's the other way round. On my last day, as I was leaving, I looked back up at Alan's villa and I could see Louis's paws on the parapet of the terrace, and his head peeking over watching me, another battered spirit partially healed and heading back to the real world. ⑦

LEARNING TO INHALE

Breathing Space retreats at Alan Dolan's Lanzarote villa, near the beach at Famara, are held throughout the year and cost from €395 for two nights (staying in the main villa, with shared bathroom), including daily one-to-one sessions and airport transfers. This is on a self-catering basis but full board (vegetarian) is available at €30 per day; a separate apartment is also available to hire. A maximum of four clients are taken at any one time. See <http://breathguru.com>