

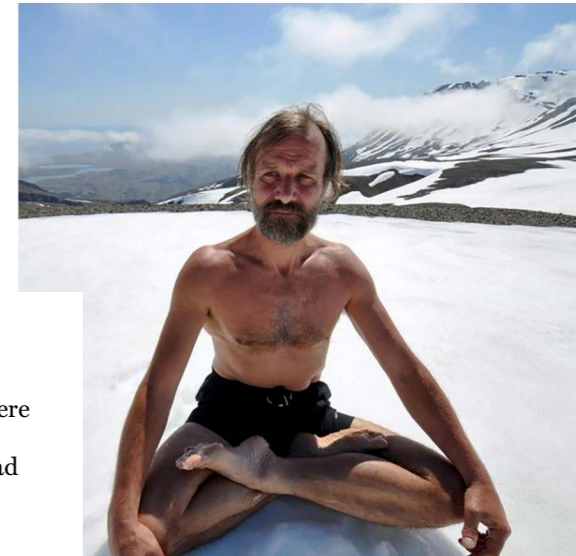


Hiking through snow in bikinis and swimming in icy rivers are all part of a wellness craze known as the Wim Hof Method. But does the Hof live up to the hype? Courtney Thompson takes the plunge to find out

Wim Hof instructor Leah Scott leads a group along the Dead Horse Gap track in the Snowy Mountains.



FROM LEFT Breathing exercises are key; the man himself, Wim Hof.



Looking to my left, the mountain drops steeply into a fog of nothingness. In sub-zero temperatures, I'm crouched down, dressed in nothing but bike shorts and a singlet. I feel paralysed with fear, and it dawns on me that this is the moment I might die. What the hell am I doing and how did I get here? It's all thanks to a man named Hof (no, not that one).

Wim Hof, also known as "The Iceman", is something of a human marvel. After losing his wife to suicide in 1995 and becoming a single father of four, the Dutchman began swimming in ice water and meditating in the snow as a coping mechanism, which evolved into a full-blown phenomenon. Breath work, cold exposure and commitment form the three pillars of the practice he's subsequently founded, the Wim Hof Method, which now counts celebrities including Gwyneth Paltrow and Jim Carrey as fans.

He's broken more world records than I have words to list, went temporarily blind swimming under a frozen lake (he set a record of 57 metres) and ran a half-marathon in the Arctic. Barefoot. He's a creature of fascination for scientists, who in one notorious study injected him with an *E coli* endotoxin, which would ordinarily cause sickness, but Wim showed no symptoms of illness. And perhaps most outrageous of all: he claims anyone can do what he does. "People need to wake up to their own power," he told *The Guardian*. "Everybody has this nature."

Apparently that includes me,

a journalist lured to the retreat by an editor who saw images of people jumping into ice water and knew there was a story in it. I clocked the word "retreat" and thought, "Sure, how bad can it be?"

...

My first problem is that I don't have gloves. "Do you know where we're going?" We're on our way to a Wim Hof retreat in the New South Wales Snowy Mountains and the woman I'm carpooling with, Julie, is looking at me as though I've only recently developed mental faculties.

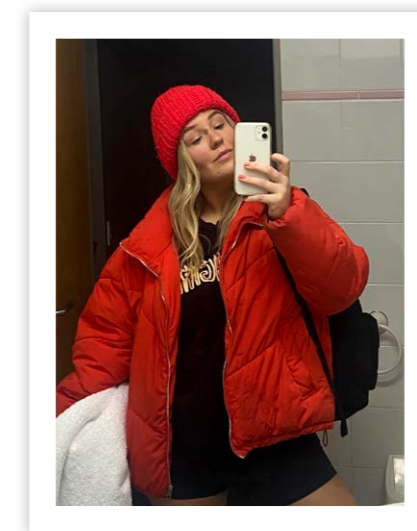
"Sure," I reply. "Jindabyne."

"It's going to be very cold," she says, unconvinced. "Like, snowing. We've just had the biggest dump of snow in May. Have you ever been to the snow?"

"Well, no."

"Oh, this is going to be fun."

We have a six-hour drive ahead of us so I already know it isn't necessarily



Author Courtney Thompson before setting off for her first plunge into a freezing river.

going to be "fun". Nonetheless, we spend most of the trip chatting. She tells me she's a "healer" and trained for a year to become a "channel" for people's past-life spirits to communicate through. She's convinced I was guided here. "It's no coincidence you got in my car to go to this retreat," she tells me. I refrain from telling her that actually it might be exactly that.

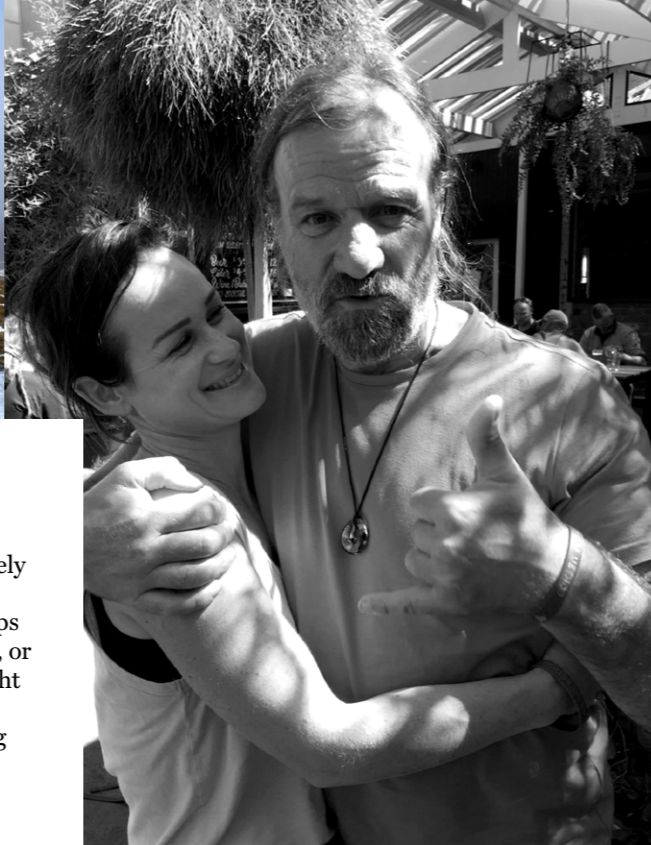
On the drive, we meet up with Sam. He has a beard that reaches his chest and is wearing a T-shirt that says "Got Spirulina?" Talk eventually turns to the waiver we were required to sign before attending. "Did you read it?" Sam asks. "It's pretty hectic. Basically signing away our lives."

I listen silently, slowly digesting what I'm hearing, with the knowledge that I have not actually read the waiver, nor signed anything. Surely my editor wouldn't send me on something that could potentially end in death? I quickly start shooting off texts to friends questioning my sanity.

Upon arrival, we're told to head straight to a cold tin shed to meet the others. It's here that I'm introduced to the founder of our retreat, Leah Scott.

In 2015, Scott was battling crippling depression and anxiety. Recently separated from her husband, with whom she shared two young boys, her life had been completely turned upside down and she felt like she'd lost everything. Then one day she

FROM LEFT Hikers crossing a ridge; Scott with Hof in Thailand.



listened to a podcast about Wim Hof. Intrigued by Hof's claims that cold exposure and his breathing techniques can greatly reduce, if not eradicate, mental ill health, she went to Jindabyne in the NSW Snowy Mountains and submerged herself in the lake's glacial waters. She floated, and for the first time in a long time, felt free.

After training as an instructor in the Wim Hof Method, Scott worked with Hof himself in Thailand, then founded her NSW-based retreat, Wild Things Anatomy. She's the first person to run women-only Wim Hof retreats and is the only one in Australia who takes participants into the outdoors, as opposed to using inflatable ice baths in conference centres.

"I'm living this dream I created in the river five years ago," she tells the group, a congregation so eclectic it's reminiscent of a scene from Liane Moriarty's book *Nine Perfect Strangers*. Along with the aforementioned healer, there's a public servant, an ex-prisoner, a millionaire former mummy blogger, a tradesman and me (slightly sceptical journo).

Scott begins to guide us through the breath work Wim Hof is famous for. For 30 minutes, we go through a series of rounds where we completely fill our lungs, empty them and then hold our breath for as long as we can. At one point, the pace of the breathing is increased, leaving you hyperventilating in unison with the group around you. Throughout, Scott guides us, repeating the refrain "fully in, fully out" and other statements, like "you are safe, you are loved" and "you are doing what others won't, so you'll live a life that others can't".

The breathing technique is derived from an ancient Tibetan method known as Tummo and the theory behind it is that we're training ourselves to be able to withstand cold exposure by re-creating the natural fight-or-flight reflex we experience when exposed to intense cold. We're activating our parasympathetic

nervous system, making our body relax, signalling to it that there's no reason to be distressed.

Doing the breath work, I definitely feel a tingling in my hands and feet, and slight light-headedness. "Perhaps it's actually working?" I think. That, or it's the five margaritas I had the night before at a fashion week afterparty. I make it through the first breathing session and afterwards we sit in a circle to share our experiences. One man tells us that he saw a lion with a light shining down on it. Another swears he had an out-of-body experience, and floated amid a pristine blue sky. Call me a cynic, but if you cut off oxygen to your brain for an extended period of time after inducing hyperventilation, isn't it obvious that you're going to start seeing things?

Scott then announces we are going to do our first plunge. Tonight. There's a hum of discussion – no-one expected us to plunge so soon. At this point, I've accepted that I'm so ill-equipped for this retreat it makes no difference to me whether we plunge tonight or tomorrow. May as well get my first taste of transcendence over with.

Scott takes us to the river, which is about 7°C. We're to slowly wade in, then drop down so our entire bodies are submerged up to our necks. I figure the best approach is the one I've already adopted: don't think about it, just do it.

It's like a thousand tiny needles piercing the skin, pain mingled with intense discomfort. But it's not totally unbearable. I focus on my breathing, as Scott stands behind us shouting instructions: "Fully in, fully out. You got this!" Everyone is buzzing. And yes, I do feel amazing. Partly because I can feel the endorphins

rushing to my brain and partly because I'm shocked I did it without the loss of any toes or fingers. In saying that, I can feel neither.

The next day, we return to the circle for sharing. It's at this point I'm introduced to the concept of "holding space". Over the course of the three-

day retreat, this phrase is used a lot. When we come together after the sessions, we are "holding space" for the emotions of each other.

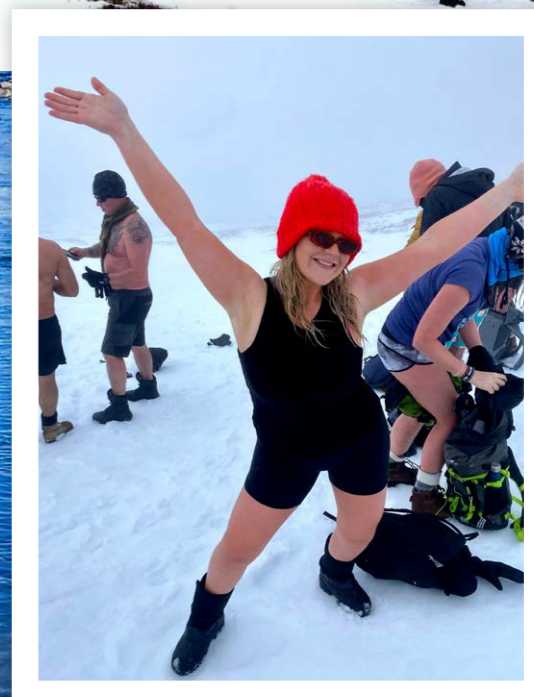
It's immediately apparent that I'll need to be able to hold a lot of space. One woman tearfully reveals she recently experienced a devastating loss of an ex and that she feels guided to the retreat. "This is where I'm meant to be," she says. Everyone in the group nods. A man explains that for years he struggled to communicate, to express his emotions honestly and authentically. "It was one of the major reasons for my divorce," he tells us, tears rolling down his face. Then he started doing Wim Hof and everything changed.

The emotion that is brought out by the breathing exercises is well-documented. In the *Goop Lab* episode about Wim Hof, one of the editors begins crying during the session. At no point do I feel particularly overcome with emotion during the breath work or afterwards. I don't want to make up a story, either. So I simply "hold space" for others as they confess their feelings. It's only when the young female artist opens up that I feel the tug of something stirring. "Growing up, I had a lot of problems with eating disorders and hating my body," she explains, beginning to cry as she confesses that cold exposure and breathing helped her finally start accepting her body for what it was: beautiful and strong.

Our day follows a pattern: breath work, hike and cold plunge, more breath work, another cold plunge. By the time of our third plunge, in the Thredbo River, I feel nothing but



FROM LEFT The Thredbo River was a bracing 2°C; inclement weather descends on the group; Thompson after completing the 10-kilometre hike.



contentment. Sure, it's uncomfortable but there's something thrilling about finding out the water you just spent two minutes in was a mere 2°C. And you didn't die.

The big test, however, is the hike. We wear nothing but boots, gloves, a beanie, bike shorts and a singlet, or no top at all for the men. Scott tells me it's her favourite part of the work she does. "There's a moment when we're walking the mountains and the participants have this mind-body connection. They connect, they get it, they feel amazing and they look at me and their eyes are just wide and they're smiling. It's just a nod: 'This is it.' I get tears in my eyes every time I think about it," she says.

"This is why I do it. For people to just feel that again, because we all have that within us – that complete connection, presence and capability to be in the moment."

In the lead up to the hike, my

cynicism fades as excitement sets in. Having proven I can plunge, that the cold climate doesn't faze me as much as it might others, I'm keen to know about the hike. Scott excitedly tells us there was a huge dump of snow the night before, so we'll be getting the full experience. Julie asks nervously how Scott knows we won't get hypothermia. The response is reassuring: "If you feel yourself getting too cold, like you need to put a layer on, do it. Listen to your body." Scott's priority is always safety, and she understands everyone has their own boundaries, which she respects.

It's a testament to her that as we were hiking the mountain, I never once felt unsafe. The most difficult moment came as we approached a slope that didn't have a clear path on it. Without thinking, I started upwards, then looked to my left and realised the drop was, well, exceptionally steep.

"Leah, I'm not sure about this," I say.

"Focus on following my footsteps. You've got this."

I do what she says and miraculously I make it.

One foot in front of the other. Really, it's how we make it through life. And it's how I made it up the mountain as snow fell on my exposed skin and the temperature dropped to -5°C. There was nothing else but me and my breath and the thoughts I had complete control over. When we made it to the top, I could barely wipe the smile off my face. I've drunk the (very) Kool-Aid and am experiencing the Wim Hof high.

Walking down the mountain, I was overcome by an intense sense of kinship with my body – a stark contrast to the negative relationship I've fostered with it for most of my life.

But it carried me up a mountain through a mild blizzard while I was wearing very little. So many women become accustomed to focusing on what's wrong, what could change, what might be better if we looked different, made ourselves smaller. Hiking the mountain made me appreciate the sheer ability of my body and its strength. And as I descended, looking over the mountains with my skin patterned by goosebumps, I began to cry.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF WILD THINGS ANATOMY.