



TRIP OF A LIFETIME

Nothing could help *Decca Aitkenhead* process her grief after her husband drowned in Jamaica. Until she returned there for a magic mushroom retreat

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ABBIE TOWNSEND



have never felt so sick, abandoned or terminally alone. A dragging sickness in my stomach grows insistent, until the nausea is worse than chemotherapy, morning sickness and food poisoning combined. Everything around me has been draped in a ghostly white sheer netting, transforming this beautiful lush tropical garden into Miss Havisham's attic. Wherever I turn, everything is ugly, deathly and hostile. I'd always wondered what a bad psychedelic trip would be like. An hour ago I took 9g of psilocybin, and now I know.

The staff members dotted around the garden look sinister and menacing. One has turned into an eerie statue and appears to be levitating on the wall. The fellow guest lying on the lawn resembles a corpse. The only refuge I can think of is my bed, but getting there from my sun lounger is a Herculean challenge of co-ordination, and turns out only to make matters worse. I have never felt more nauseous or isolated, or wretched with regret. Coming here was a truly terrible idea.

I'm in Jamaica to try to process a series of catastrophic traumas. In 2014 my life imploded when my partner drowned after rescuing our four-year-old son from an ocean riptide. A year later I underwent a double mastectomy and chemotherapy for breast cancer, and had to abandon our rural family home, which my sons loved, for a city they loathed. Although in remission now, I'm haunted by fear of orphaning them and can't escape the shadow of cancer. Widowhood has left me feeling disconnected from the world, impersonating my old self while inside feeling blank. I think I conceal it well, but know I'm in considerably worse shape than I pretend to be. I have tried therapy, yoga — even veganism — but nothing seems to have helped.

When a friend suggested magic mushrooms, I thought he was joking. Then I read *How to Change Your Mind*, Michael Pollan's 2018 bestseller about the emergence of a new psychedelic medical movement. Psilocybin, mushrooms' active psychedelic ingredient, is currently being trialled in leading university hospitals across North America and Europe on patients suffering from depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, addictions and eating disorders. Last year, Imperial College London launched the world's first Centre for Psychedelic Research, followed by Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in

SHROOM SERVICE
Above: doses vary according to body size, drug history and emotional constitution

FOREST BATHING
Right: Decca enjoys a moment of calm reflection at the MycoMeditations resort in Jamaica



Baltimore, which unveiled its own centre for "psychedelic and consciousness" studies. Results so far have been astonishing. Patients report miraculous and enduring psychological transformations, and the vast majority rank psilocybin one of the five most meaningful experiences of their life. According to Home Office data, 1% of men and 0.4% of women aged 16-59 in England and Wales took hallucinogens last year. And if further proof were needed that "shrooms" are becoming more mainstream, look no further than *The Goop Lab* — Gwyneth Paltrow's new "wellness" docu-series for Netflix — which follows a group on a psilocybin retreat.

I signed up for a week at a magic mushroom facility, MycoMeditations, and in December I draw up with a friend at a string of opulent villas overlooking a cliché of turquoise Caribbean sea. There are eight other guests from America, mostly middle-aged or retired, and with seven retreat staff we dine by candlelight on fine china. The only clue that this isn't your standard luxury resort comes when our



attention is drawn to an antique silver case on the sideboard, which we were told contains a limitless supply of spliffs hand-rolled at dawn every day by the butler. It all felt promisingly fun. I'd taken mushrooms recreationally years ago, and had a hoot; the promise of a deeper psychic cleanse this time is thrilling.

The following day, holding a plastic tub of fat grey capsules, each containing 0.5g of psilocybin, the retreat director, Eric Osborne, goes round the circle calculating our optimal starter doses according to body size, drug experience and emotional constitution. My only worry is my first dose won't be big enough. Whether it's dental anaesthetic or hair dye, I always seem to need more than everyone else. Eric recommends 9g for me, we plug down the pills and disperse to our designated trip locations.

And now here I am, completely off my head — and psilocybin very definitely isn't working for me.

It must be around sunset when Eric appears at my bedside. "Eric," I groan. "I hate you. This is the worst thing I've ever done." He smiles, supremely unfazed. "Uh-huh. Yup. Wishing you were dead?"

"I have literally longed for nothing else." He says I feel sick because I'm purging the trauma within me. "But I'm really good at taking drugs! This nausea isn't my trauma; it's your mushrooms."

"Yeah," he nods, smiling. "I hear that a lot."

"How much longer will this last?" He studies me. "By the looks of you, another good hour at least. What you're doing now, this is the work."

"This isn't work, you lunatic!"

"We could try some nostril-movement."

I struggle to sit up, tangled in sheets, to shout at him properly. "You think wiggling



my nostrils is going to help? You might as well tell me to bring a penknife to a nuclear war. What else have you got?"

"Well, you could try getting on all fours on the ground and kind of rooting around." "You want me to pretend to be a badger? Are you insane? You're useless."

Every time I open my eyes, the hallucinogenic visuals are still grotesque. The nausea gets so overwhelming I beg for death. Eric says he's seen this all a thousand times; up to a third of first trips go like this. Finally, thankfully, I fall asleep. At 2am, I wake with a banging headache, a mouth like a decomposing rodent and legs too wobbly to walk. Come dawn, I decide, I will pack my bag and get out of here.

To MycoMeditations' critics, my unhappy first dose would confirm all their fears about psilocybin. Prohibited in almost every country on the planet, the hallucinogen is legal in Jamaica only because no government ever got round to outlawing it. Thanks to this legislative oversight, the island has now become a global mecca for magic mushroom retreats: MycoMeditations, founded by Eric, is the market leader but still can't keep pace with rocketing international demand. In 2018, he ran 12 retreats; this year, 36 are already booked, with a long waiting list of guests willing to pay up to \$11,000. He hopes the Jamaican government will see the potential for the country to capitalise on its accidental status as a psilocybin leader, but as MycoMeditations' profile grows he fears a backlash.

A former teacher from Kentucky, with a deep Southern drawl, Eric doesn't look or sound like anyone's idea of a mental health expert. Last month, a Jamaican newspaper ran a front-page story branding MycoMeditations a medically unqualified,

WIDOWHOOD HAS LEFT ME FEELING DISCONNECTED FROM THE WORLD, IMPERSONATING MY OLD SELF WHILE INSIDE FEELING BLANK. NOTHING HAS HELPED



INNER VISIONS
Left: One of the MycoMeditations "facilitators", Justin, checks in with Decca during a trip

PARADISE FOUND
Below, top: the resort's idyllic surroundings. Bottom: guests enjoy fine dining

recklessly "high-risk rave". Eric had to go on national TV to try to reassure Jamaicans that psilocybin poses no long-term threat to mental health. His views are backed by scientists at Johns Hopkins who, in 2018, stated that "psilocybin is one of the least harmful drugs to society" and called for the legal classification of mushrooms to be reduced in America. Since then, the cities of Denver, Colorado, and Oakland, California, have effectively decriminalised psilocybin. Yet in Jamaica, the controversy continues to rage, flamed by rumours that a body of psychiatrists is preparing to demand that Myco be closed down. Frankly, by the end of my first trip, I'd have been inclined to agree.

On the morning after our first dose, we gather for "integration" to discuss our experiences. With the exception of a 25-year-old advertising executive from San Francisco called Mike, I'm the youngest in the group. Paula is a retired biology teacher, here to resolve existential angst about her mortality; her husband, Jay, is a retired pathologist intellectually curious about psilocybin after reading Pollan's book. Married for 37 years, they share a sober-minded, scientific sensibility, and have not taken drugs before.

A retired computer engineer describes "a general sadness and unhappiness that's manifested in anger against the world. I have had a successful life. But it hasn't brought joy." An airline pilot has similarly "achieved a lot of things" and ostensibly "had a wonderful life", but his jokey bonhomie conceals a lifetime of self-loathing. In secret he self-medicates on alcohol and pills, disgusted by shame, terrified that his innate badness will be exposed. "If people know the truth about me, I'm in trouble." A venture capitalist is another middle-aged high achiever privately wrestling with unresolved self-doubt and remorse.

There's a psychiatrist, Simon, who looks like a success story on paper, too, but describes his preschool sons as "terrorists" to whom he feels "more like a stepfather than a dad". The most nakedly troubled guest is Mike, just 25, who resembles an artist's impression of pure, unadulterated human pain. Mike can't make eye contact, and his body looks as though it would always rather be anywhere than wherever it finds itself. He talks in a halting, tremulous tone, and no one is surprised to hear him say: "I feel empty, like a cardboard cut-out separate from the" ➤

PHOTO: TOWNSEND FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

living experience, like an empty cadaver.”

To my surprise, everyone else seems to have had a positive experience with their first dose. I discover that my friend had ditched the suggested black eye mask and Johns Hopkins classical playlist and had been having a ball dancing to reggae on the beach with assorted facilitators. This confirms all my suspicions that Eric is talking mumbo jumbo about my trip when he says the mushrooms had forced me to confront my fundamental belief that I’m alone and unwell in the world. I think it just proved that taking drugs in pitch darkness without your mates is a stupid idea. He asks us all to sum up our “takeaway” from the experience. Mine’s easy: “Never again.” I grudgingly agree to give the mushrooms one more go, but only if my friend and I are allowed to trip together. Eric agrees, and even offers to dose with us.

After we’ve all been dosed with even more psilocybin than last time — 12g in my case — Eric leads us to a lawn two villas away from everyone else. I lie on the grass in the sunshine and assume the brace position. An hour later I’m still waiting for the horror to show up. Puzzled, I turn to Eric, who is hugging a tree. “Is the apocalypse still on its way?” Then to my surprise, I start to giggle and the next eight hours are more fun than I have had in more than 20 years. We laugh so much I think my ribs will crack — and couldn’t care less if they do. Eric keeps trying to get off with trees, and forages on all fours, indeed like a badger. I discover that dancing on my back with my arms and legs in the air is exquisitely joyful.

“Eric,” I gasp between gales of giggles. “You can’t seriously tell me this is going to make a whit of difference to my inner psyche. Let’s be honest: we’re not ‘taking medicine’ or ‘doing work.’ I mean, look at us! We’re just having fun taking drugs.” Eric grins gnomically. “You think?”

I’m still giggling when I totter back to my room through the dark and run into Jay and Paula. “Are you OK?” Paula asks, her expression full of sympathetic concern. “I’ve been so worried about how today’s been for you.” “Never felt better in my life,” I beam, then notice Paula isn’t looking too good. “Today I have lived,” she trembles, dissolving into tears, “through the war. I have lived through the collective trauma of the Second World War. He’s been just fine, though,” she adds, pointing to her husband, who is looking rather sheepish. “He’s been off having sex with everyone — in his head!”

Integration in the morning is as gripping as a thriller. Paula holds us spellbound as she describes being transported during the war back to Finland, where her family had lived. Bombs are raining down, Russian soldiers are advancing; they will die if they stay. Paula convulses with sobs, alternating between English and Finnish, shaken to her core but divining significance in the



GROUP THERAPY

Above: an “integration” session, where experiences are shared. From left: Zoe, Seamus, Eric Osborne, Decca, Justin

HUGGING IT OUT

Below, top: Decca with Zoe, one of the facilitators who look after the guests. Bottom: Jay, a retired pathologist, and his wife, Paula, a retired teacher



experience that makes new sense of her difficult relationship with her mother.

While Paula had been in Finland, Jay had been seeing vaginas in the trees. “Lots of general vulva imagery everywhere,” he reports. “Basically sexual images for the entire time. I went back and forth between being male and female. I don’t know if that means I’m very shallow, or very well grounded. I was basically having super-orgasmic sex and it was very nice. It wasn’t specific, just random, like a porn film.”

Mike is unrecognisable. His voice no longer quivers, his features have loosened, his limbs have relaxed and his eyes shine. Overnight he has turned into a startlingly handsome young man. Both trips had been “very positive”, he beams, “and my takeaway is: it doesn’t have to be that hard. Just say yes to joy. It’s as easy as that. It’s all OK.” The simplicity stuns him.

But it is Simon, the psychiatrist, who steals the show. An unremarkable-looking middle-aged man, he reveals a jaw-dropping catalogue of childhood trauma — his mother’s rape and suicide, his gay father’s death from Aids, his own stroke and paralysis at 15 — all compounded by a “predatory, reptilian attorney” who’d tried to sue him for the death of a patient, leaving him feeling “raped in court”. All this, Simon speculates, might explain why the previous day he’d needed to ask a 6ft 6in facilitator, plus the Jamaican nurse, to both lie on him while he had writhed and twisted, convinced his body was expelling a dragon. By all accounts it had been a sensational spectacle, one I’m secretly very disappointed to have missed.

Compared to everyone else’s trip, by now mine seems almost embarrassingly frivolous. When it’s my turn to read out my “takeaway”, all I’ve written is “Can’t wait

for the next party tomorrow!” To pretend my experience had been anything more meaningful than a good laugh feels ludicrous. It is only that night in bed that I realise I haven’t laughed like that in years. In fact, my 10-year-old son has a codeword he whispers whenever my mirth sounds inauthentic to him. “FL” stands for “fake laugh” — and it’s true more often than even he knows. Authentic laughter feels like a language I once knew how to speak but had thought forgotten for ever, and now I can giggle again like a child. I feel closer to both Eric and my friend following our trip together than I have to anyone since the day I was widowed. As we laze about on the beach chatting and swimming, I try to work out how far this is down to the mushrooms.

Psilocybin reduces brain activity in an area of the brain known as the default-mode network, or “me-network”, which ruminates and worries and is often hyperactive in people suffering from depression. By closing down this area — or “dissolving the ego”, in Eric’s words — psilocybin allows the brain to activate new pathways, enabling the patient to break old patterns of thinking and ingrained habits of mind. (The mental health conditions psilocybin categorically cannot treat are bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, because of a risk of psychosis.)

Eric cautions that the final dose may not prove as ecstatic as the second, but it is even better. Music has never sounded more magical. Sublime bliss suffuses my entire being, pulsing light and love. As we sprawl on the grass watching the sun hover over the horizon, the lilting charm of Bobby McFerrin’s *Don’t Worry, Be Happy* dissolves us all into wondrous peace. Without a doubt, one of the best days of my life.

After the retreat we all keep in touch, and everyone reports feeling fundamentally altered — “More connected and joyful.” Mike says: “It’s no exaggeration to say that, thanks to the retreat, I have to rethink everything I thought to be true about the world.” Simon separates from his wife, but says: “The odd thing is that in many ways my life is really a lot better now.” Jay and Paula’s marriage has been fortified by “heightened spiritual connection”.

I’m thrilled for all of them, but still convinced I’ve taken home nothing more significant or enduring than the memory of two unforgettable parties. We’re advised to be mindful of everything our brains process, and to keep a journal of our thoughts. I’ll be far too busy for that, I think — so am completely unprepared to find myself scribbling down notes at 2am in bed, as epiphanies keep bubbling up.

Ever since being widowed, I realise I’ve gone to exhausting lengths not to alienate anyone’s goodwill, by being indiscriminately nice and polite, pretending to be a Good Girl. Instead of keeping

“TODAY I HAVE LIVED THROUGH THE SECOND WORLD WAR. MY HUSBAND HAS BEEN OFF HAVING SEX WITH EVERYONE — IN HIS HEAD”

people close, it has achieved precisely the opposite effect. Everyone can sense the inauthenticity of the performance and smell a rat, and as a consequence I’ve ended up much lonelier — not to mention very bored. Good manners do not generate intimacy, and in the coming weeks I experiment with my new bolshier self and discover relationships becoming instantly richer and more interesting. I also find my domestic fuse has grown much, much

SHROOM FACTS

WHERE ARE THEY FROM?

There are about 200 psilocybin-containing or “magic” mushroom species, found on every continent bar Antarctica. In Europe, the small, potent liberty cap mushroom is the most common.

ARE THEY LEGAL?

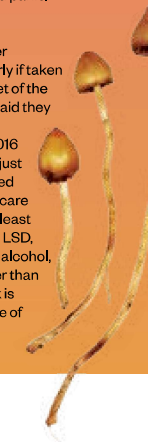
In the UK, magic mushrooms are a class-A drug. It’s illegal to possess them, give them away or sell them. Possession can lead to seven years in jail, an unlimited fine or both.

HOW DO YOU TAKE THEM?

They are consumed in many ways: fresh or dried, brewed into a tea or ground up in food. They can make you feel giggly, euphoric, connected to people and nature around you, energised and excited. “Bad trips” can occur — symptoms include nausea, chills, vomiting, headaches, paranoia, anxiety and panic.

ARE THEY SAFE?

Psilocybin can trigger psychosis, particularly if taken in large quantities. Yet of the 12,000 people who said they had taken magic mushrooms in the 2016 Global Drug Survey, just 0.2% said they needed emergency medical care afterwards, a rate at least five times lower than LSD, cocaine, MDMA and alcohol, and three times lower than weed. The larger risk is eating the wrong type of mushroom — which could prove fatal.



longer. For the past five years it’s taken almost nothing to tip me over the edge: a broken heel, a mislaid key. It’s been like driving around in a car with no suspension. Suddenly, to my children’s amazement, I have new shock absorbers, and the minor provocations of daily life no longer pitch me into despair. This unfamiliar serenity is severely tested within days of my return, when a fraudster tricks me into emptying all my bank accounts into his. For seven days I have £80 in the world to my name, and no idea if the bank will refund me — yet I’m more sanguine about the calamity than I was last time I lost my phone.

The future has assumed a new reality in which I can actually believe. Having spent five years managing nothing more ambitious than simply clinging on, a new-found fuel of energy and optimism sees me making plans. In the first week alone after coming back from the retreat, I put in an offer on a house, look for a better school for my son and make all sorts of other changes that had previously felt impossibly daunting. But the biggest surprise of all involves sugar. Ever since my mother died when I was nine, my relationship with chocolate has been a textbook case of addiction; I wake up craving Dime bars and salted caramel KitKats, and every corner shop I pass seems to be staffed by an invisible siren screaming, “We have Maltesers, come in!” A normal relationship with Cadbury’s has been as unimaginable to me as the idea of stopping after two glasses of pinot to an alcoholic. Now, miraculously, the psilocybin has silenced the sirens. I don’t suddenly hate chocolate. I just like it like a normal person does.

Taking psilocybin feels like being restored to factory settings; or to the self I used to know before everything went horribly wrong. I’m forced to concede that Eric was right about my first dose: I really was “doing the work”, purging myself of sedimentary layers of trauma. He was right, too, that what I’d mistaken for frivolous fun

had been a profound reconnection with the possibility of joy. For that matter, he’s been right about everything. I had teased him by addressing him as “Guru”, but by now it no longer feels facetious. As the Sunday Times’s chief interviewer, it’s my job to meet impressive people, but I don’t think I’ve ever interviewed anyone wiser or more humane than Eric.

I stop thinking of all the people I know who would benefit from a retreat when I realise it would be quicker to think of anyone who wouldn’t, and can’t come up with a single name. “They say it’s like 10 years of therapy in a week,” Paula confided as we were saying our goodbyes. “But that’s not true at all. It’s worth at least 20 years.” ■

More information: mycomeditations.com; psychedeliccity.org.uk