

Getting clean in the hills of Thailand

By AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Laughter drifts from a pool as the bass of an upbeat dance track thumps through bamboo walls. Guests chat and joke on the banks of the River Ping over cigarettes and green smoothies, as the Hills of Northern Thailand dominate the horizon.

You could be forgiven for mistaking The Cabin as another luxurious Thai getaway, until a man casually asks over lunch: "So when's your release date?"

The idyllic setting of this 50-bed rehabilitation facility, positioned discreetly on the outskirts of trendy Chiang Mai, conceals a more serious purpose.

More than 1000 clients have passed through since The Cabin was set up in 2009 and more than one-third have been from Australia.

All are addicts - drug abusers, alcoholics, problem gamblers, even sex addicts.

"People suffering from addiction disorders need to be removed from their environment, full stop," program director Alastair Mordey says.

"We've got to do it. So why not send them to the best environment you possibly can to aid their initial recovery?"

Mordey co-founded The Cabin after working as a counsellor in Tottenham. He was frustrated by the UK's unimaginative "nanny state" mental health system - a criticism he also applies to Australia.

The abstinence-based treatment uses a mix of cognitive behavioural therapy, mindfulness meditation and a tweaked version of the 12-steps approach of Alcoholics Anonymous.

While the positive response was immediate, Mordey doubts the first arrivals knew what they were in for.

"If they'd known how serious an experience it was going to be, they might not have come," he says.

"What they were in fact looking for was a soft option or holiday. Which it is."

But the luxury is balanced against rigorous meditation and the sheer depth of often-confrontational therapy, he says.

"By the end, they often say it wasn't a treatment - it was an experience. It's a life-changing experience."

"That's what early recovery should be."

All The Cabin's counsellors are recovering addicts, which gives them a practical understanding of the issues, Mordey says.

Psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses and coaches for fitness and yoga round out the treatment team.

Each client is assigned a lodge and a tailored schedule of process groups, individual counselling, meditations, recovery planning and exercise.

Walking around the immaculately maintained gardens, dotted with ornaments and cosy benches, I consider how much of a contradiction the whole idea is.

Australians have made about 50,000 trips to Thailand each month in 2014, according to the Bureau of Statistics.

Many are no doubt lured by the promise of party hot spots and beachside revelling. Yet here, in the hills of the country's less-commercial north, a fraction of that number swim completely against the tide of indulgence on a mission to get clean.

Upon admittance, passports are surrendered. The front gate is locked using finger scan technology.

In-treatment romances are prohibited but do happen. Internet use is restricted. Cigarettes, however, are allowed.

The clients appear relaxed and social. After lunch, a counsellor introduces himself to me before outlining my choices of activity for the afternoon. He has assumed I'm a new client.

It's not the first time a journalist has been mistaken for an addict and it is unlikely to be the last. Business executives, students, labourers, lawyers, doctors, models, Olympians and musicians have sought treatment here. I look just like everybody else.

"DANCING WITH A DEMON"

That's how Mordey describes addiction to a group of seven recovering addicts who've been treated at The Cabin during a therapy session.


They must accept that "this demon is bigger than me," he says.

The group is living at a secondary care facility near the bustling city of Chiang Mai, having 'graduated' from the main site after at least two months of treatment.

The house is seen as a stepping stone - a way of testing their skills before fully reintegrating into society.

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Mordey gives a presentation about his spiritual take on the traditional 12 Steps approach.

They discuss the constant risk of relapse, the need to make amends and the importance of identifying a "higher power" for guidance.

"If nothing's permanent, then the bad things aren't permanent either," he says, warning them they will experience four to five year "seasons" of recovery with varying risks of relapsing.

Brisbane resident Ryan Black, 27, is at the beginning of the process having arrived at the house barely a week ago.

Opportunistic drug use spiralled into an 18-year battle after he was introduced to speed at the age of nine.

"As soon as I had that I was basically hooked," he says.

"It only took me two years before I started injecting, and basically from then it was out of control."

At the height of the addiction, Black used his parents' overseas holiday as a chance to go on a week-long bender.

But he landed in hospital after an overdose from injecting and snorting pills that had been made with a strand of acid.

"I was stuck in hospital for three days, strapped to a bed, shitting and pissing myself ... luckily I came out of it alive, thanks to the doctors basically."

His girlfriend at the time left, but a moment of realisation arrived when he contacted an estranged partner with whom he had a child.

"She asked me if I wanted to go around and meet my son. The first time I saw him I knew things had to change.

"The next day I was on the internet looking up rehabs."

Black is now preparing to return to Australia for his first family holiday with his son, now 18 months old.

"I do think about drugs every day ... but I don't react to those insatiable urges anymore," he says.

Fending off the temptation will be a lifelong battle, he admits.

IF YOU GO:

* Treatment options: 28 to 90 day primary care programs consisting of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), mindfulness meditation, exercise and a secular 12 Steps philosophy.

* Cost: \$12,900 (AUD) per month including access to aftercare in your home country.

* Location: About 20 minutes outside the northern Thailand city of Chiang Mai.

* Optional secondary treatment accommodation at 'Sober House' in Chiang Mai (\$4000 AUD per month), where clients have more freedom over their movements but maintain a link to The Cabin.

* Getting there: More than a dozen airlines, including Qantas, fly to Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport from Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, with domestic flights to Chiang Mai.

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