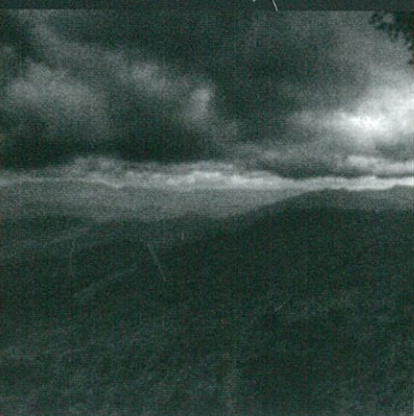
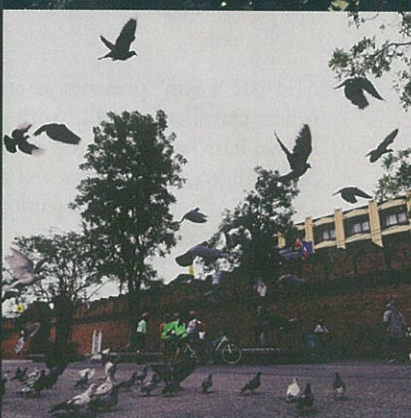
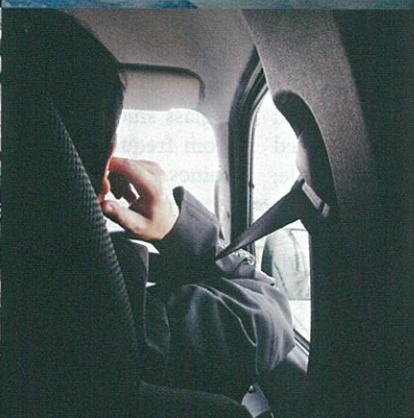
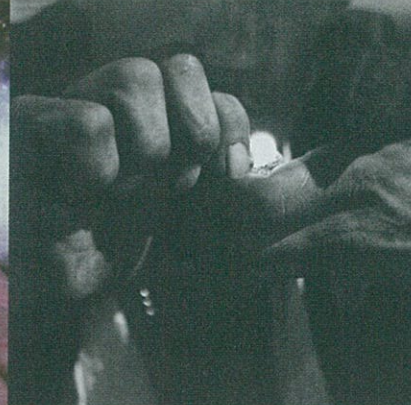




rehab tourism

WE FLY TO
THAILAND
TO MEET
SOME OF THE
GROWING
NUMBER OF
AUSTRALIANS
HEADING
OVERSEAS TO
TREAT THEIR
ADDICTIONS.

LIAM SPRINGS FROM
THE CAB, MUMBLING
SOMETHING AT THE
DRIVER – POSSIBLY
THANKS – AND
MARCHES INTO SYDNEY
INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT.
IT'S MID-MORNING AND
THE PLACE IS ALREADY
A MESS OF FLUORESCENT
LIGHTS AND FOREIGN
ACCENTS. BRIGHT AND
LOUD, IT'S NOT IDEAL.



HIS QUICKSTEP CONTINUES TO THE NEAREST DEPARTURES SCREEN. STARING AT THE CASCADING JUMBLE OF NUMBERS AND GARISH AIRLINE LIVERIES, HE CLOCKS HIS FLIGHT AND JOINS THE QUEUE AT A NEARBY CHECK-IN COUNTER.

Mid-30s, Liam* presents as any of the day's other travellers – tall, with close-cropped brown hair fashioned atop a slightly-stubbed face, bulging brown eyes and a forced smile; excitement and fear companions on this, his first trip to Thailand.

A lengthy nylon strap resting on his shoulder draws down to a large bag butting his left calf. He's failed to fill it – T-shirts, shorts and footwear that doesn't stretch far beyond thongs, bundled together with some toiletries. He wasn't concerned. He was headed to the tropics for a month, maybe longer. Whatever else he needed he could grab in Chiang Mai.

After the requisite questioning ('Yes, I packed my own bag'), Liam barges past the bustle, bound for the closest bathroom. He picks the far cubicle, double-checking the silver metallic lock on closing the door. It's tight, shouldn't slip open.

The sound of other men and the whirring throttle of a set of hand dryers will act as cover.

Scooping into his shorts pocket, he produces a glass smoking pipe, its end stained brown from frequent flame. From his other pocket comes a clear plastic moneybag that houses a small rock of methamphetamine. Ice. Crystal.

A party boy who swapped a career in finance to pursue more wayward ways, he's spent the past few months on a planned bender.

Propped against the toilet cistern, he starts what's become a familiar routine – pack, light, inhale, engage. The syrupy wash of the high races across his chest, down his arms and legs. He remains seated, loses time, tingles.

Jolted back to reality, he ditches the baggy and pipe in a bin on exiting the bathroom and makes his way to customs. Despite the security, there are no nerves – not now. He's flying. Yet there's still a couple of hours until take-off.

Pushing past passport control and the scanning machines, he's into the commercial buzz of duty-free where promo girls in yellow,

'they're always dressed in yellow,' spruik cheap spirits that surely only appeal to those bound for Balinese hair-braiding sessions.

Liam heads directly to his gate. Here, time crunches through a jumble of speeds. He's soaring; those around him, static. He drops in and out of their chatter. 'Benign.'

On hearing the call to form another queue, this time to board, he necks some Valium. The effect is not instant but they do the trick – the flight and transfer across Hong Kong International a blur, vague memories of a phone call to his drug dealer, 'goodbye', and a collage of unfamiliar faces.

Chiang Mai Airport is smaller than expected – it feels regional, like landing at Albury NSW. Not that that's a bad thing.

A gentle man, Swiss, perhaps German, with a greying mop of hair and kind face greets him. Liam takes the front seat of the silver Pajero and they meander, slowly, across town, motorbikes buzzing around them as

they shunt past illuminated night markets and the walled remnants of the old town. Along and over a murky waterway, the pair eventually arrives at a high, nondescript bamboo gate, fronted by a small, gravel parking area. There's no sign announcing this as Liam's new home for the next 28 days. No alert that this is often referenced as one of the best facilities of its kind. No communication that beyond the fence are a growing number of Australian patients – all of whom have ditched the local medical system in favour of an overseas drug and alcohol rehab centre.

T

Tall and gym-fit, Alastair Mordey sports an air of confidence alongside a mauve, French-cuffed, shirt – skull-shaped cufflinks pulling the sleeves together – tucked into navy suit pants that fall onto a pair of fastidiously-polished black leather Chelsea boots.

His head shaved, his jawline sharp, he's one of the founders of Chiang Mai's The Cabin, "Asia's best and most respected drug rehab and alcohol addiction treatment centre," at least according to the PR guff.

It's the place TV host Grant Denyer allegedly sought solace a few years back; the same joint musician Pete Doherty was reportedly kicked out of in 2012 (before reengaging with a similar Thai centre last year). And it's here that Liam chose to stop his spiralling drug habit.

Once a luxury resort, The Cabin is not as most would imagine rehab. Running alongside the fast-flowing waters of the Ping River, manicured tropical gardens wrap around a smattering of teak and more modern, rendered concrete buildings – a mixture of patient accommodation (each receives a luxurious private room with ensuite, cleaned daily by maids) and communal buildings covering off the main office, kitchen, gym and several patient meeting rooms.

This is what's known as primary care. A minimum of 28 days, behind that same

locked fence, working through whatever issues have brought people inside these perimeters.

It's lunchtime when GQ lands and many of the patients are perched at communal, outdoor tables, digging into a menu of beef and chicken curries, steamed fish and rice. Others throw about a volleyball in the in-ground pool, chatting loudly. If addiction is the common language, a distinct Australian twang is its accent.

"Aussies have always made up to 50 per cent [of patients]," says Mordey of the operation he and a group of British clinicians and businessmen set up in late 2009. "And we get a mix. Obviously there's a lot of bottomed-out addicts, but by and large our clientele is made up of professionals ranging from the middle classes right up to people in the armed services, doctors and lawyers, politicians, royalty even.

Then there's well-known sportspeople, singers, artists and celebs."

Of the Australians, men outnumber women, while 48 per cent of those who presented in the 12 months to October 2014 were aged 27-37. As for the top three addictions being treated, alcohol tops methamphetamine and prescription drugs.

"We went from eight beds in 2009 to what is effectively 60 beds now. We're usually at 90 per cent [capacity] and have been the whole time.

We are one of the fastest growing centres in the world, if not the fastest growing." In discussing the number of Australians seeking international addiction services – one that is, anecdotally, on the rise – Mordey's conversation wanders into what he perceives as the failings of many Australian facilities.

"Australia has a very, very high [medical] standard, but what they've done with addiction is apply a heavily medicised model... Look,

the message I hear is the programs are built, attended and run by the medical establishment in very clinical environments. There are waitlists; there are court-mandated people in there that the patients may not choose to mix with; they are infested with [illegal] and prescription drugs; they overprescribe to people and effectively keep them high. And there's no

holistic emotion or intimacy-based therapy going on, there is no human element. It's all wipe-down walls, hospital beds..."

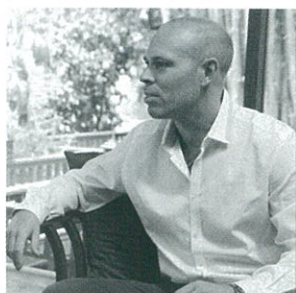
The Cabin's program is built on an approach that combines AA's '12 Steps' (but rewritten in secular terms) and CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy). In broad terms, it's about acknowledging the disease of addiction and retraining the brain.

"Ours is a modern take on treatment – addiction is complicated, this is not a single gene disorder. It's going to take a long time to work out exact treatment models but we have a 90 per cent idea of what it is now, and all the research and medical bodies like ASAM [American Society of Addiction Medicine], NIDA [National Institute on Drug Abuse], APA [American Psychiatric Association] and so on, well, we now know it's a disease. It's not a moral behaviour, it's not what people speculate it is – it's a brain-based illness.

"So, knowing what we know, we've gone and tailored CBT for addicts, which hasn't been done before. And a lot of people don't understand '12 Steps', so again we've interpreted and changed it," says Mordey.

Daily life for those living at The Cabin begins at 8am and revolves around a mixture of counsellor-lead group sessions combined with fitness, meditation, yoga and Sunday excursions. Of the counselors, most are recovering addicts. Mordey included.

Raised by a single mother in the rough and tumble of King's Lynn, north-east of London, he was smoking cigarettes at seven,



FROM TOP: LUXURY REHAB CENTRE, THE CABIN, IN CHIANG MAI; CO-OWNER, ALASTAIR MORDEY.

had a fascination with fire aged 13 and by 15 was a “problematic” drinker regularly seeking out fights with older men.

“I broke people’s ribs, noses, cheekbones, fingers and would wake up with stab wounds in my legs.”

He somehow scraped some schooling together and found his way to a “shit” university course in Manchester. While studying he became “a recreational heroin user and drifted into fairly organised drug dealing”. Another student – the local kingpin and dealer for a notorious council estate – became Mordey’s friend. “He was earning big money dealing speed and E’s in the Hacienda [nightclub] and we soon clicked and formed a working partnership. During those three years, we did zero hours of study, shifted approximately \$1.5m worth of stolen goods, cannabis, ecstasy, amphetamines, crack cocaine and heroin, and still passed with 3rd class degrees. Not exactly drug lords, but not bad for a couple of teenage students.”

Like those he treats, the 42-year-old’s story doesn’t end there – more crack, more heroin, more fires. Induced paranoia started to circle him, so too some disgruntled IRA thugs. It led to homelessness and a plea from his mother to stop. Mordey headed to a farmhouse in Norwich and literally sweated out the many misgivings of his youth.

“To this day, when my clients complain about how rough their withdrawal is, I smile knowingly and think – really? I nearly died in that withdrawal. Nobody even mentioned medical treatment. I was alone.”

A recovering addict, he says, is invaluable – patients more likely to identify with counsellors in recovery better than

general counsellors. “And those that have been through addiction and are now in recovery tend to communicate better with the addict.”

Mordey certainly has the respect of the patients at The Cabin’s Sober House facility – a city-based Chaing Mai townhouse for those wanting to continue treatment while testing the waters on the ‘outside’. Here, it’s about putting in place teachings, and navigating normality – while also keeping up the weekly AA/NA meetings.

It’s at a Sober House group session that we meet Liam.

“I came to The Cabin thinking I’d get clean, be clean for 12 months, then be OK to start using again – I was in so much denial,” he says. “It was actually Alastair’s presentation when I was like, ‘OK, I get that.’ From that day my mindset changed.”

He spent 28 days in primary care, extended it for another month and has been in Sober House for a week at this point.

“I had no initial plans to do this, but I researched it and obviously found that the longer you do treatment, the better your chance [of sobriety]. And by this stage I knew the consequences of using again – it wasn’t pretty, so I made the decision to give myself the best chance.”



A COMMUNAL AREA AT \$14,000-A-WEEK THE CABIN.

Alongside Liam, Sober House patients include another Australian, Amy*, a young Briton and a Burmese-American. Mordey is scrawling ‘mind maps’ on a whiteboard, drilling down on each patient’s emotions and exploring

triggers. After the session, Liam continues to delve into the specifics that landed him here.

“Mine was a slow burn to rock bottom,” he says, sat back on a couch, sipping a mug of instant coffee. “I was working in finance and partying, taking meth and all sorts, but the job wasn’t conducive to my drug taking, so I went and got work in a sex shop to support things.”

He then planned a 12-month bender, “to party and have fun,” knowing he’d need help by the end. Within six months he’d overdosed three times.

“I discharged myself the first time – it was my birthday; my party week. I bought up big – G, K, X, MDMA, pot, alcohol and ice. At the end of the week, I was back in intensive care.”

An eventual and strung-out family intervention acted as a blessing.

“I knew I needed help but was in denial about things. And I wasn’t overtly looking overseas, but thought, ‘I’m not getting an overseas holiday this year so why not go to Thailand.’ No one thought I’d come here and get clean. But once I made that decision I thought, ‘fuck it’, this is the way it is and I was right onboard.”

The next day, Sunday, we return to Sober House to join the current group, and some former Australian patients who’ve chosen to stay on in Chiang Mai, on one of the centre’s weekly excursions. It plays into the holistic approach of what’s being offered – to take the patients into the wilds of northern Thailand, for hiking, cycling, kayaking. Today’s excursion is a little easier – a meal and swim on a floating lake barge an hour out of town.

On the drive out there we chat to Amy, from Perth, who’s nearing completion of her time at

“I BOUGHT UP BIG –
G, K, X, MDMA, POT,
ALCOHOL AND ICE.
AT THE END OF THE
WEEK, I WAS BACK IN
INTENSIVE CARE.”

The Cabin. Her first taste of hard drugs came at 15 – held down by her then boyfriend and injected with heroin against her will. At 20, she turned to meth.

“I’ve been using longer than I haven’t been,” she says, as the silver minibus belts past tended rice fields before lurching up into dense, hilly terrain.

Amy attended a few Australian treatment centres before making it to The Cabin. Each time she relapsed. For her, rehab meant either hospital or a form of religious dogma. Her decision to try something new, to travel to Thailand, came after her “worst rock bottom.”

“My eldest boy [13] found all my dirty needles in the syringe disposal box, which I stashed at the back of a kitchen cupboard,” she says, her eyes watering at the recollection. “He emptied them out on my bed and said, ‘You love these more than us, Mummy.’ Yep, that was it for me.”

Today is the 32-year-old’s final excursion, heading home after three months.

“The last treatment centre I went to was nothing like this. This place is beautiful, and they’ve given me a real fighting chance. It’s not about running away from issues [by coming overseas]. I’m not hiding, I have to deal with emotions and thought patterns, in case I run into old associates. Drugs are everywhere and here’s how to deal with that – this is what The Cabin has taught me.”

We pile out of the vehicle and into what’s best described as a slim wooden canoe with a powerful outboard motor. Fifteen minutes later and we’re relaxing on the front deck of an overwater hut, a string of them attached to a nearby restaurant kitchen. Two waitresses appear with food – rice, curry, pork with basil and a whole baked fish. Over lunch I chat to a twentysomething Melbourne lad who’s remained in Chiang Mai after completing time at The Cabin. Not wanting to be named in this article, he speaks of Thailand’s beauty and the positive effect it’s had. He doesn’t want to leave and is eagerly seeking work.

His stories are as before. He tried, and failed, to get clean in Australian rehab centres. Again, what he found was the overuse (his word) of prescription drugs to combat personal withdrawal from meth. He also makes mention of money, and the fact The Cabin, at \$14,000 a month, is cheaper than comparable facilities in Australia, America, Mexico and Europe. Malibu’s well-known Promises is roughly \$72,000 a month, while the impressive Kusnacht Practice in Zurich costs up to \$133,000 a week. Meanwhile, Byron Bay’s Sanctuary means a \$140,000 monthly bill.

“You don’t want it to be about the money, and it’s not only that, but it is a factor,” he says, juggling a Collingwood AFL football he’s brought along. “It’s what they offer, the

teachings and what you learn. Then there’s the Thai culture and the actual setting – all of it adds up to be better than anything I could find in Australia.”

He eyes the expanse of water stretching out in front – a shimmering vista that eventually butts the bottom of a sparsely-vegetated mountain.

“Seriously, look at this view. It’s awesome. And it’s rehab.”

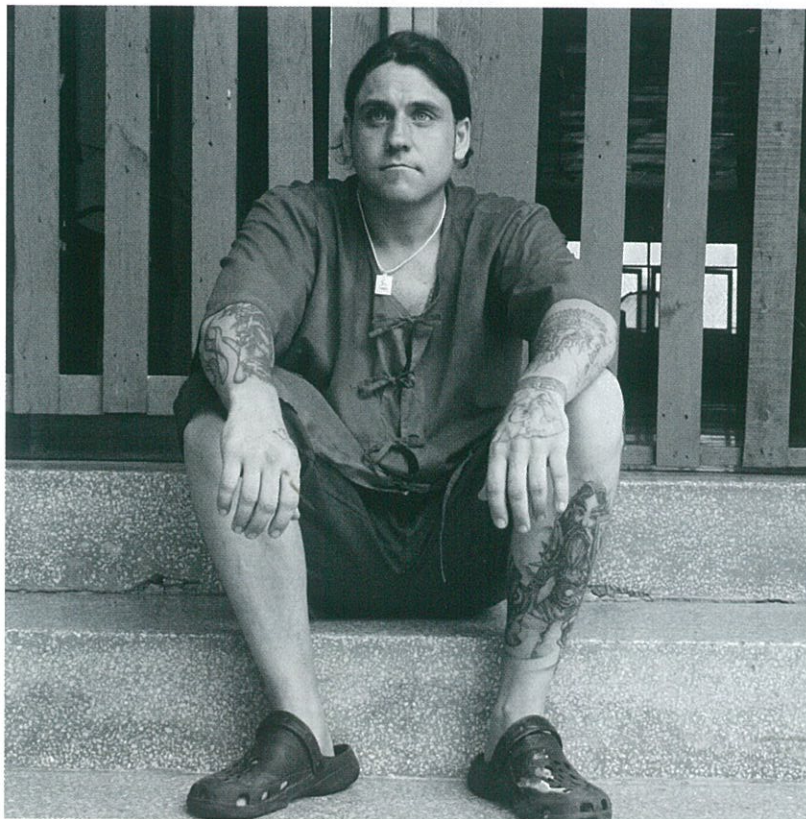
A day earlier, I’d asked Mordey about the financial side of things – about the fact he’s peddling hope. And the fact that same hope, from the looks of it, is paying pretty well.

“You could say it’s a multimillion-dollar annual turnover,” he said.

Little wonder Thailand is fast becoming so-called ‘rehab tourism’s’ global capital – several private centres, each catering to predominantly western clients, now scattered up and down the country.

B

THOMAS
BRORSSON,
FROM SWEDEN,
AT THAMKRABOK
BUDDHIST
MONASTERY.



Bundled wads of cash aren’t exactly being counted at the other Thai facility GQ visits, a place that’s welcomed drug-dependent westerners since the ’50s.

Thamkrabok Buddhist monastery lies in regional Saraburi, a few hours north of Bangkok.

Like so much of Thailand, the drive out is a visual headfuck. The six-lane freeway is a funnel of chaos, littered with overloaded trucks and 1980s Suburu utes, their trays stuffed with workers trying to shield themselves from scorching heat (43°C says our car’s thermostat). We pass two severe accidents, three overturned trucks, a guy riding a scooter with his outstretched foot in a cast and numerous billboards promoting Tesco chicken breasts. After two hours, the concrete outlook gives way to greenery, mountains penetrating the horizon and an eventual turn-off to Thamkrabok.

The monastery is a scattering of buildings and other bits – ornate temples, large halls, a dry-docked boat, wooden shacks, a smelting operation and small shantytown of lay people.

Tudong monks, dressed in brown robes, are either wandering, tending to gardens or other pieces of machinery. They're used to the arrival of white-faced westerners who come, weekly, eager to purge themselves of personal addictions.

It's 39°C on landing – the day's stifling humidity worn like an unwanted hug. We're first greeted by a crew of wily, wiry dogs, their collective gnawing of themselves put on hold to sniff out the newcomer. A small stall selling ice creams and other bits sits opposite our landing spot, in the shade of three golden Buddha statues. Across from it, a man shapes cheap rubber thongs, as worn by the monks and patients of the detox centre.

We're eventually met by *Mae Chee*, or Kanticha, a nun and an ex-heroin user from East Anglia in the UK. She came here in 2004, cleaned up, and now runs the centre.

"Through here," she points to a long brick wall with a gate, above which are several flags. The tour of the 'facility' doesn't take long. Dormitories – basic affairs consisting of rickety beds with thin mattresses and ceiling fans working overtime to move the heavy heat – frame a courtyard featuring a makeshift pool (think narrow pond). International guests are

housed separately to the Thai men; women in their own dorm, which is locked each evening. The majority of faces are Thai, just four westerners sweating it out – from Norway, Croatia, Sweden and Australia.

"It's nearly three o'clock," announces Kanticha as we wander into a secondary, main courtyard. Several monks have laid out a row of silver buckets, behind which 22 patients stand, before kneeling, scooping and consuming a murky brown liquid made from a combination of herbs, local tree roots and grasses. It induces vomiting.

This is a daily ritual at Thamkrabok – all new patients accepting of the uneasy routine, viewed as a sacred vow of recovery, or *sajja*, for the first five days of their stay. Kanticha explains the specifics of the centre she runs with a firm hand and acerbic sense of humour.

"Once someone is checked in, they're stripped of any valuables and taken to the centre where they get a bed. They wake up at 4.30 each morning to sweep, at 5am they have five minutes of exercise [some stretches, maybe star jumps], a steam bath at 11.30, meditation at 1.30pm and then more sweeping. If they're new, they partake in the [vomiting] *sajja* at 3pm and it's lights out at 9pm."

In reality, most spend their days shuffling about the confines of the centre, chaining cigarettes and chatting to anyone who'll listen. "It's like a little family here and everyone tries to help one another out. We don't force our beliefs on anyone – though some choose to go to chanting with the monks and really get into it. Others don't, and sit around a bit more. They learn a lot from being around the Thais, though, as they're not heavy and solemn and are always laughing and smiling. It's funny, the Thais definitely deal with suffering better – westerners complain a lot more."

The minimum agreed stay is seven days and most suggest they'll leave within a month. The service 'costs' an \$8 donation, per day, covering basic daily meals.

Jeremy*, from Perth, mumbles about the three days he's spent here so far.

"It's no holiday camp. It's basic, and that drink is horrible. I guess it's a different way to detox, you wouldn't get this in Australia."

Only 20, he came here after abusing meth, heroin and Oxycontin.

"I started oxy two and half years ago, ended up munching about eight a day but it was getting too expensive, so I started heroin, smoking it and then injecting it. And then meth – because it was cheaper."

Having overdosed twice, he first sought help at a West Australian rehab centre. "But it was full of dickheads and drugs. I was given Valium every hour and turned into a zombie."

He found Thamkrabok on the internet. "It's sure cheaper than what I did in Perth – it's basically free. And I like it 'cause it's clean, no [prescription] drugs involved."

We ask Jeremy if he thinks it will assist – bearing in mind the lack of actual rehabilitative services. He nods, agreeing that most days are spent smoking cigarettes and sweating, locked in personal thought.

"But we also talk to the older guys and that's been good. They give me advice and stuff."

Forty-year-old Thomas Brorsson has been at Thamkrabok for 25 days. From near Gothenburg, southern Sweden, he's piercing blue eyes and a happy demeanor. Numerous



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A MONK BREWING THE "VOMIT DRINK"; THE SACRED VOW OF SAJJA; JEREMY, 20, FROM PERTH; PATIENTS HEADING BACK FROM STEAM BATHS.

"TREATMENT AT HOME – YOU GET DRUGS AND MEDICINES FROM THE HOSPITAL. THIS TIME I WANTED TO QUIT EVERYTHING."

tattoos mark his body – a World of Warcraft warrior inked into his left shin.

"I injected amphetamine between 18 and 29, but then I became a father and stopped for five years. And then I came back to it."

After his eldest daughter found drug-related messages on his computer, his girlfriend researched treatment centres and discovered the monastery. He last used three days before boarding his flight. "Treatment at home – you get drugs and medicines from the hospital. This time I wanted to quit everything."

He accepts the sleepy pace of the centre and general lack of engagement has meant lengthy days of introspection. He's also taken to painting the dormitory – his way of saying thanks to the monks, who'll accept anyone who turns up, regardless of whether they can afford the minimum basic payment.

"I can hardly remember my first week here – it's a blur. I followed the other people and talked a lot. But I have calmed, I've taken a step back and I've had time to think about my life and what's important. It's simple here, I like that. My mind is generally racing all the time, not right now."

Still, the heat and lack of air conditioning have proven arduous.

"The mosquitoes are awful. But it's the heat that is the toughest – trying to sleep when it's still 30°C, with just a ceiling fan, it's crazy. But I want to do this, I want to walk away from here better than when I came. I already am. I am happy with where I am now."

T

Travelling to ameliorate one's health isn't a new phenomenon. Epidauros, on Greece's Saronic Gulf, lured ancient Mediterranean types to visit the healing powers of Asclepius – while kicking back in balmy, local waters.

And the increased waves of Australians engaging overseas addiction services shouldn't come as a surprise, considering the amount dealing with such dependencies. According to the United Nations 2014 World Drug Report, we're now the biggest global consumers (per capita) of ecstasy, second in opioids, third in methamphetamines and fourth in cocaine.

Such statistics underline the lure of The Cabin and Thamkabrok – especially as both claim higher-than-average recovery rates.

"We have a 90 per cent success rate," chimes Mordey. "Though what's a success? Nobody's defined that. Are we talking somebody decreasing their harms, somebody being sober for a year, not injecting anymore, never using drugs for the rest of their life? And how do you collate those stats?" Exactly.

Nadine Ezard, clinical director of the Alcohol and Drug Service at Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital speaks openly of her worries around overseas rehab centres and the many private facilities that now inform the multibillion-dollar 'health tourism' industry.

"I've met people and family members who'll go to any length to help loved ones or people they know change their lives – and it's pretty easy to exploit that kind of motivation," says Ezard. "So one of my concerns would be about the profiteering motives of some of the centres, though that's not to say there isn't profiteering in the private sector here."

She also questions difficulties for patients attempting to integrate back into Australia and a return to 'normal life'.

"A patient might have managed to achieve their goals in rehab, but the second they're back outside, and the context of their lives hasn't changed, then they get back to whatever they were doing before. We're talking about a chronic relapsing condition, so people will have repeated episodes – they may need help again and the issue with doing it somewhere that isn't home, you don't have the post-rehab care."

When we next talk, Liam has celebrated nine months sober. He's moved to the southern Queensland and with the support of family is working as a lifesaver.

"It's been a long journey," he says. "The thing is, you're so cotton-wooled over there that when you come out, and come back, dealing with life on its terms can be a shock."

Still, he states The Cabin saved his life.

"I was privileged and lucky to go there, and I know that many people won't have that same opportunity. But it was a great experience. Too many Australian places ignore the CBT side of things, but that's what really helped me. All that work they did – it arms you with the tools to come out and survive."

Future plans, for now, remain loose. Though he's eyeing off university and a possible degree in geosciences.

"Something along those lines. I want to discover a dinosaur fossil, that's my motivating factor. It'll be a more isolated, regional uni – that's what's best for me as Sydney's still a no-go."

"And sure, I could always be a little bit fitter, but, y'know, life's good. I'm in such a better place and I'm not looking back." ■