

SPIRIT of ECSTASY

On a conscious clubbing weekend at Osho Leela, Will Gethin enjoys a drug-free high

In a large hall, a crowd of revellers parade and mingle in outlandish face masks and costumes; empresses and harlots twirl for abbots and jesters while brigands and monsters flirt with courtesans and cat women. A highwayman and a disco king take centre stage with a microphone. "Tonight's masked ball is based on the Venetian carnival practice of being anonymous and doing things you wouldn't normally do," taunts the Highwayman, in a melodramatic Italian accent. "So let's explore, take risks - see what happens!"

"The carnival is about to start," declares the Disco King, "so say the following words after me. I will respect the carnival," he cries, punching the air as the crowd yell back. "Tonight is for total excess so I'm really going to have it! Starting now.....Let the carnival begin!" Lights flash, an uplifting house anthem kicks in and the Venetian carnival roars to life. On this Puravida conscious clubbing weekend at Osho Leela, it's Saturday night and the Venetian masked ball is reaching fever pitch as wild dancing bodies cavort and whoop with excitement to an infernal surcharge of carnival beats.

Osho Leela, a community in the heart of the Dorset countryside, is one of hundreds of Osho centres worldwide; it was set up 14 years ago to continue the legacy of the late Indian guru Osho who died in 1990. Osho famously fused Eastern teachings

with Western psychotherapy and designed a range of active meditations – typically involving singing, dancing, shaking and shouting – to quieten the busy Western mind. His aim was to transform his sannyasins on a path to meditative aliveness and personal freedom by breaking down their conditioning – all the 'false learning' and repressions bequeathed from parents, teachers and society – so they could uncover their authentic selves.

Zorba the Buddha

Osho also championed the path of 'Zorba the Buddha' – total celebration of life in the present moment – fusing the sensuous lust for life of Zorba the Greek with the meditative purity of the Buddha. He believed the disease of modern society to be this split between Zorba and Buddha, and that humans could only find peace by accepting their dual nature rather than suppressing it. Inspired by Osho, the Humaniversity in Holland was founded 30 years ago offering ongoing therapist training for people committed to exploring themselves beyond their self-imposed limits. Humaniversity trainings are also held at Osho Leela which today is what holds the community together, while it also hosts workshops and retreats in tantra,

biodanza and other spiritual disciplines, in addition to parties and festivals.

Puravida literally means 'full of life' in Spanish, and Puravida club weekends reflect the spirit of Zorba the Buddha and the Humaniversity, as well as aspects of the rave scene, I gather from Puravida founders Rakendra and Devaraj (Highwayman and Disco King). "We wanted to create an amazing party without drugs," Rakendra elucidates, "combined with spirituality and the core values of the Humaniversity trainings – awareness, friendship and love."

"You can get quite high off Humaniversity work," adds Devaraj, who is also manager of Osho Leela, "so Puravida is like this freeform weekend with a clubby atmosphere in which you can go deeper and find stuff out." And is drinking part of the Puravida package? "Sure you can drink, we're not into squeaky clean," says Devaraj, "Osho was about living life to the full in every moment, it's Zorba the Buddha."

The programme for this freeform weekend (Thursday-Sunday), includes satsangs, various Osho meditations and a range of workshops – including yoga, bioenergetics, biodanza,



Top & Above: Venetian carnival



Biodanza is practiced outside.

kizomba dance and Ratu Bagus Shaking (an ancient Balinese healing ritual). And Sunday promises the piece de resistance – AUM Meditation – an epic rollercoaster journey through an extreme range of human emotions. Club nights in Zorba, the main hall, feature house and world music DJs, and in addition to a lively bar and juice bar chill out zone, there's a yurt sauna and hot tub for kicking back in till the early hours.

Arriving at Leela last night (Friday) – a country house set within 14 acres of beautiful countryside – I dropped my bag in my dormitory, Gryffindor, and feverishly descended to Zorba for the 9pm evening gathering, wooed by stirring bass lines, where some 130 people were hamming it up on the dance floor, including representatives from Romania, Germany, Holland, France, Sweden, Israel and Malaysia – as well as DJ Karim, just flown in from Marrakesh. I first discovered Osho in 2000, when I spent a couple of months at the Osho Commune in India. Falling in love with the place I threw myself into the meditations and therapy groups with gusto and left India feeling momentarily transformed but was to endure a challenging 'dark night of the soul' before ultimately emerging enlivened and more attuned to my authentic self. I was wary of the Osho path for a while, it's intense and can be precarious if you jump in head first – but I'm excited to be back, now re-engaging in the moderate yet exhilarating context of this club weekend.

Following the dance warm-up and a few announcements, the evening gathering was completed with the customary Osho Leela hugging ritual which involves embracing as many people as you can – only an 'Osho hug' entails holding each person intimately for 10-30 seconds or more; experienced huggers are likely to emit a contented 'Hmmmmmm' sound or even the more expressive 'Aaaaaaaahhh' out-breath release. While these hugs can feel a little overwhelming to newcomers, they're great for dissolving social boundaries, bringing more friendship and intimacy – and at the ensuing club night I bonded freely with this ostensible group of strangers till 3am, intrigued to find more high flyers from the business world among the alternative lifestylers than on my last visit six years ago.

Oversleeping the vigorous 8am Dynamic Meditation (designed for releasing suppressed emotions and boosting energy), after breakfast, I attended satsang – an exquisite performance of flute, violin and song, punctuated with singing bowls, spells

of silence and Osho quotes, as the audience hummed in accompaniment.

Next – faced with a choice between bioenergetics (therapeutic work with physical exercises and breathing techniques) and kizomba dance (an African hybrid of tango and salsa) – I plumped for kizomba, relishing playing out the steps of this fun and sensual dance.

After a tasty vegetarian lunch in the gardens, I embraced the community spirit with a shift of dish-washing in the kitchens before attending a mask-making workshop hoping to create a mask for the carnival – but facing 'mask maker's block' I decided to buy one of the masks displayed for inspiration – a magnificent feathered owl mask, far superior to anything I could hope to produce myself.

At the ensuing Mahamudra Meditation, we danced to beautiful Native American-style music tuning into how our bodies wanted to move and expressing ourselves freely without habitual socially conditioned restraints, before gathering in a circle for a prayer ritual.

Rummaging in the dressing up room after dinner, I emerged with a lavish frock coat and donning my feathered mask, I rocked up for the carnival in the guise of 'Barone Gufo' (Baron Owl), amazed by the surreal profusion of masquerading characters, it was impossible to recognise anyone. A hilarious play within a play began, about Osho Nova (a cross between Osho and Casanova) and his pursuit of Venetian virgins. A titillating Burlesque dance performance then paved the way for the carnival dance to begin...

Crazy joy

Hot and sweaty from dancing, I take a break from the carnival at 2am, heading outside to cool off together with Shanni, an artist from Totnes. "I've loved the fun, beauty and imagination of tonight's masked ball," Shanni says, "it's like being in another world." Stumbling upon a large Buddha statue, she removes her exotic eye mask and places it over the icon of purity. "Thank you Zorba the Buddha!" She grins. On our way in we encounter a guy dressed as a prostitute. "It's been such a release to

escape into a different personality!" he laughs.

Over 50 people attend AUM Meditation in Zorba mid morning, the climactic two and a half hour catharsis spectacular. At the techno-charged warm up, everyone dances more vigorously than ever, letting out plaintive cries and savage yells – 'waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh' – beaming up wild smiles and taking it to the limit. AUM is a powerful practice ground for expressing emotions, covering everything from anger and madness to love and laughter over 12 stages. I attended a few AUM sessions in India and loved them. I was a little overwhelmed by the process at first, but as I gradually let go and put myself out there emotionally, it was like getting drunk on energy – you start to lose your inhibitions and break through to a deeper, freer part of yourself.

Suddenly we're off – 'Anger' stage one begins – and a hefty dreadlocked guy is screaming his hate at me, his face contorted with venom. "I hate you too!" I rage back, trying to connect with my anger, faking it to make it. A few more rounds, and then into 'Love' – saying 'I love you' to each person in turn and hugging them, and it feels great to feel love for those I just hated. Next comes high energy running on the spot and then we're into 'Kundalini Rising' – shaking our bodies as a hypnotic dance track carries us on a transcendental journey – it's uplifting to cry out as the music soars, letting go and moving through blocks and barriers into new regions of being and expression.

At the 'Crazy' stage, people roll on the ground, screaming and shouting, pulling faces, being animals, beating the walls – releasing all that caged up madness. Then huddled with a partner to the melancholy music of 'Sadness', she sobs in my arms as I try to connect with my inner child, digging up emotive memories till I well up. Jumping into 'Laughter' – I'm chuckling away now, pulling funny faces, japing and tickling people, till the music drops, slow and sensual for 'Dance of the Lovers' – a stage designed for taking risks, for being total in the flow. I approach a girl I'm attracted to; I hesitate, she moves towards me, places a hand on my shoulder and looks into my eyes. "Just relax," she whispers, as my hands fall onto her hips. We draw in close, habitual caution swept aside.

"People report feeling chilled out after Puravida for about a week," Devaraj tells me, "you can escape the mental prison and get this powerful flux of energy into your life." One month on, I can say Puravida really sparked me up for the coming weeks ahead. ts

More information

Osho Leela's next Puravida conscious club weekends are January 13th-16th and April 29th-2nd May, 2011. Tickets £110 dorm, food included. Call for other accommodation options. For more info check www.puravida.uk.com or call 01747 821221. For more information about Osho Leela, its Humaniversity Trainings and other events, visit www.osholeela.co.uk. Osho Leela is at Thorngrove House, near Gillingham in Dorset.



Mask making for the carnival party.