

BEYOND A Surf Retreat



SURFERS KASSIA MEADOR AND LEAH DAWSON LEAD A TRANSFORMATIVE RETREAT IN SAN ONOFRE

By LIZA MONROY

“Kassia is a vibe,” my travel companion, the surf and lifestyle photographer Mei-Li Restani said. We were southbound on Highway 1, headed from Santa Cruz to San Clemente for a Salty Sensations retreat – the brainchild of masterful surfer-entrepreneur best friends Kassia Meador and Leah Dawson. The moment I saw, back in January, their summer retreat in a small group setting in San Onofre, I submitted a deposit.

The opportunity to surf with icons in the iconic waters of San O felt like fate: Kassia and Leah are my vision board of surfing. I’d watched endless videos, followed them online, and taken Kassia’s virtual longboarding course. San O was the spot-version of that: on my Surfline favorites for years, but I’d still never been. I hadn’t spent more than two nights away from my three- and six-year-olds. Add pandemic parenting to the mix, and it was no wonder I’d put some of my dreams on pause.

I picked up the van we rented from New Native Camping on Opal Cliffs, relieved to find it was easy to drive and outfitted with a lofted bed, warm-water shower, and ample space for surfboards, of which we needed all.

Sunday night, we glamped at Waypoint Ventura, a local friend’s recommendation, filled with retro and vintage Airstreams and trailers. From the Ventura pier at sunset, I glimpsed the lineup at C Street in the distance. We fell asleep early on the comfortable memory-foam queen mattress in the cozy van. At sunup, Mei and I realized that the best thing about van life is that the usual travel hassles are nonexistent. We drove to C Street for dawn patrol, pajamas to wetsuit.

Creating a Community Vibe

The campground in San Clemente was a spacious, open area perched atop a bluff overlooking the ocean. Kassia and Leah greeted us with warm hugs and smiles, their high-vibe energy palpable. I instantaneously understood what Mei meant when she said Kassia is “a vibe.”

People arrived from as far away as New Hampshire, New Jersey, and Florida, and as close as LA for the four-day retreat. One mother-daughter duo made me hope one day I might bring my children. After sharing our stories around

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the campfire, I realized this retreat would be about more than surfing. In the lead-up, I was thinking about cross-stepping closer to the nose and learning a famous, historically rich spot that was new to me. But as everyone spoke, an undercurrent of depth, mindfulness, and contemplation emerged. Laura, a multiple-return attendee from Malibu, told me that every group's chemistry has been markedly different: some rambunctious, others more reflective, which defines what the experience will become.

Kassia and Leah made an authentic personal connection with everyone, weaving a theme of community and common stories that unite us. "I see every one of us mirrored in every one of us," Leah said after we'd gone around the circle.

Salty Sensations started in the summer of 2020 because of the pandemic and wanting to be around people. The pair did everything on their own for their earliest retreats, down to "washing every dish," Kassia said. Next, they assembled a dream team: cooking by Aine McAteer, who has been a chef for celebrities and athletes; acupuncture and bodywork from Jen Janis, a licensed acupuncturist who has 30 years of experience treating athletes; and additional surf coaching and support from style queen Makala Smith of Dana Point, who grew up surfing San O and knows the break intimately. The staff are all friends, adding to the community vibe.

At dawn, we reconvened at the beachfront palapa in San O. Tides and time didn't matter here. We'd surf to our hearts' content from sunup to sundown — two group sessions with Kassia and Leah, and whenever in-between — a dream scenario for someone who fell in love with surfing after having kids, sneaking sessions during school hours and weekend dawn patrols. Here, as Kassia had put it, we could step outside of linear time. Not thinking about kids' schedules and favorable tide windows was a complete relief.

A land lesson followed breakfast, and we took to the waves. San O reminded me of five Capitolas on a good day, all in a row — spacious and excellent longboarding. We wore bright rash guards so our videographer could spot us, and we had a couple consistent peaks all to ourselves.

Everyone cheered for everyone else as we rode an endless supply of waves. Kassia, Leah, and Makala paddled around giving coaching tips.

When we emerged, a post-surf snack of decked-out

avocado toasts awaited. With nowhere else I had to be, and no kids, work, driving, distraction, or technology, I returned to the ocean. It was different being out alone, quiet save for breaking waves. As an extroverted-introvert, I appreciated both states — community and solitude, and how they balance each other out.

'Style for Miles'

Our evening session and the rest of our surfing in San O felt relaxing and playful as we were more familiar with the break. After dinner came a time I was simultaneously anticipating and dreading: video feedback.

Watching videos of myself surfing in the past, I'd cringe, laugh at myself, and see areas for improvement. When I'd thought I felt poised, I explained, I really looked awkward, with my butt sticking out. "We're all victims of duck-butt sometimes," Leah joked. I shared a favorite piece of advice I'd read on a women's surf blog, "tuck the tail and push the bush," which became a running joke for the rest of the retreat.

But this time, as I braced myself for disappointment, I was instead surprised to be pleasantly surprised. "Style for miles, girl, come on," Kassia shouted. It felt as if all the sessions back home I did for thrills and peace in my life, and yes, also in hopes of developing the surfer's holy grail — style — might actually be leading somewhere: a fluid cross-step, confusing and out of reach for so long, was noticeably in my wheelhouse — when did that happen?

Having started surfing at 33 (I'm 42 now) and only very dedicatedly after becoming a mom twice over, I found myself in a place I thought I might never be. So rather than deflecting, I let myself feel proud that logging (no pun intended) countless hours of water time had led to a new stop on my journey. I appreciated how Leah and Kassia focused on praise and framing tips not as evaluations but encouraging invitations, phrased as, "I'd invite you to try ..." — a refreshing way to receive critique.

"It's so wonderful to watch you surf," Kassia said later. "When it comes to turning and doing the fundamentals, it's trusting yourself, and reminding yourself of that, and letting it go in a way of not trying anything, just doing and being it."

She taught me that I need to take what I learned and make it my own — to let go. In surfing, Leah and Kassia have reached a point of expertise where, to lift a phrase



Kassia used, you can go back to the beginning and “do nothing,” but doing nothing means everything because you have attained a point of mastery. I decided I wasn’t going to work on “nosering,” but allow each wave to dictate how it wants to be ridden, what is possible, and when.

A Wonderland of Inspiration

On the second sunup-to-sundown day, San O had also evolved from stranger to friend. Our final night together, after an amazing dinner of chili and handmade tamales by chef Aine, we made s’mores and watched the day’s waves, cheering and clapping for one another’s progress.

It was a gathering of strangers who had quickly become a tight-knit group, surfing and mindfulness calming our nervous systems from the anxiety-ridden times of COVID-19.

For Thursday morning’s closing ceremony, Kassia conducted a healing sound bath. I’d experienced one before at 1440 Multiversity in Santa Cruz, to transportive effect. I hadn’t yet known the extent to which Kassia is a virtuoso in this spiritual and auditory medicine. In the last decade, she and collaborators have played at galleries, yoga studios, and parties.

She dubbed it “abductions,” which is apt, as it feels as if your consciousness is released and hurtling through space. Absorbing the sounds of her singing bowls, chimes, drum, and tuning fork, colors and patterns dancing on my eyelids beneath the foggy morning light, I let my mind travel to the universe’s outer edges. Upon return, the world took on a startling, unfamiliar sheen. Mei and I agreed our physical bodies were relaxed and released, as if we’d had a massage, but all transpired through sound.

After farewell-brunch, everyone departed, back to our own roads. As we drove away, the scent of Palo Santo and campfire lingering, Mei and I agreed the retreat was much more than surf-coaching from masters, though it exceeded expectations on that front. We’d stepped through some magical portal into a wonderland of waves and inspiration that I longed to bottle and take back home to keep forever.

I returned the van to its spot on Opal Cliffs, full-circle back to where we’d started. Familiar surroundings accentuated how I’d been altered and transformed by the past few days. I want this retreat to become an annual tradition, eventually for my daughters, too. Meanwhile, may all our senses remain open, and all our sensations be salty. 🌊

For upcoming retreats and info, visit salty sensations.com.

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