

# It's all about the sewing

Elizabeth Betts spends a relaxing weekend quilting at the justhandson.tv retreat in Buckinghamshire



The Jelly Roll class

I sew in snatched moments; an afternoon here, an evening there, so when my colleague Anne de Lanoy called to say something had come up and would I like her place on a quilt retreat the following month, I snapped it up. Based at a hotel in Buckinghamshire, conveniently just off the M40, it offered two days of uninterrupted sewing in a beautiful countryside location.

The week before I started getting nervous. What if everyone already knew each other and so weren't chatty to an interloper, what if I forgot my sewing machine lead, and most importantly what was I going to sew? It has been years since I have had two consecutive days stitching and so I went into overdrive. Much of my present sewing is by hand, I keep it in boxes under the sofa and pull it out to work on when I am watching TV - so decided machine sewing would be a treat. My options included the bag of Dresden Plates that have been patiently waiting to be sewn onto a backing for four years, two half-finished samplers and numerous tops. However, I decided to start something new as it added to the treat feeling of the weekend. After playing around on EQ7 I had plans for a four-colour Courthouse Steps quilt, and a curved pieced quilt that were to eventually be presents. I packed the day before, then at 11pm on Friday night had the great idea of using some of my beloved Liberty stash. Collected over the years it's my precious fabric and so perfect to use to make a quilt for my daughter, but did create a bit of a late night commotion as I got the fabric from the top of the wardrobe!

It was an 8am start, although I wasn't too worried about traffic as I had enough fabric to keep me occupied for days had I got stuck on the M25. Weeks before I did entertain the thought of taking the train, but I would have needed a porter to help me carry everything and sadly Southern trains don't provide them anymore. When I arrived at the

venue many had already set up. I later discovered that some stayed the night before which I would probably do if I went again. As well as the option to work on your own project with Valerie Nesbitt on hand to advise, there was a Jelly Roll workshop with Sarah Soward or Christmas makes with Pauline Bolt. All the tutors had lovely welcoming styles which echoed the friendly and relaxing atmosphere of the weekend. The retreat was officially started with a welcome, and we were given an itinerary and goodie bag containing items such as Aurifil thread and fabric samples. Then it was down to business and everyone got on with their sewing, interrupted by the odd chorus of 'oh, that is amazing' when a piece of patchwork was held up.

Although breaks were scheduled there were tea and coffee making facilities outside the room so everyone popped out when it suited them. The event organiser, Maggie, was great host. She made sure everyone was ok, and provided wonderful chatting service when we left the room to get a drink. I did wonder if she should get a new badge saying 'patchwork counsellor'. I found out she is a retired event organiser and executive PA which was more than evident in how she handled everyone, and made small adjustments such as bringing dinner time forward 15 minutes so we avoided clashing with another group staying at the hotel for a conference.

Teaching on the Saturday officially finished at 4pm, but many of us stayed sewing later as we weren't meeting in the bar until 7pm. All the meals were in a buffet-style restaurant, which was handy as there were 30 of us, and so not easy to cater to everyone's likes and allergies. I enjoyed sitting with different people at each mealtime and finding out what they were making, where they were from and why they were on the retreat. The majority of people lived no more than an hour away,



Clockwise from left: Tutor Jennie and retreat co-ordinator Maggie; One of Pauline's Christmas projects; Angela wowing us with her finished quilt top; Jane pieced, layered and started quilting over the weekend.



"... all there is to do is focus on your stitching. And that is a perfect way to spend a weekend in early October."

and one person even whizzed home for more fabric on the Saturday evening before dinner as they got more achieved than expected.

On the Saturday night Emma, Angela and I stayed up sewing until 11.15pm and had a great time. The hours flew by as we stitched away and chatted about projects, work and family. On Sunday morning, the room was available to sew for any early birds, but I planned to have a lazy start. In full retreat mode I went down to the swimming pool and Jacuzzi at 7.15am. I soon realised this wasn't an unusual way to start the day as there were already two other quilters in the pool. It was a lovely way to begin the Sunday, relaxation mixed with a satisfying feeling of working off the profiteroles I had eaten the night before. I had been so engrossed in my sewing that my back and neck were aching and so it was good to have some exercise and straighten up.

Sunday followed the same format as the day before, and finished at 4pm with a show and tell. The Jelly Roll class was in a separate room and so it was great to look in and see what everyone had been making. We were all asked for feedback, and the only thing I could find that could be improved was more irons. With the retreat being run by patchworkers this had already been noted and a different room booked with the hotel manager for the 2017 retreat earlier in the day. This was only a slight tweak, and certainly didn't detract from the weekend.

The result of my sewing was a pile of blocks, six on the Saturday and

twelve on the Sunday. On my way home I reflected that although I was a little disappointed to not get more done, I had perhaps been a tad too ambitious. The thoughts of two days had gone to my head! The curved quilt blocks needed cutting out with scissors, and progress on my other quilt had been hampered by stitching a block round the wrong way (too much chatting going on!). However, had I been at home I would not even have designed them, let alone started them, instead I would have been tidying, providing lifts to football and possibly sneaking in some work. The Jelly Roll quilts looked great, with some finishing two tops, so if I go again to make it a true retreat I will join in a workshop and follow a pattern and so create a true sewing relaxation step away from reality. It was wonderful to go and relax. Jane, one of my new sewing buddies, summed it up when she said she loves the retreats as with having space to sew, help on hand and all your meals taken care of, all there is to do is focus on your stitching. And that is a perfect way to spend a weekend in early October. ◇

Liz went on a retreat organised by [justhandson.tv](http://justhandson.tv)  
They have weekends booked for 2017 in Gloucestershire, Henley and the same hotel in Buckinghamshire. For more information visit [justhands-on.tv/events/retreats](http://justhands-on.tv/events/retreats)