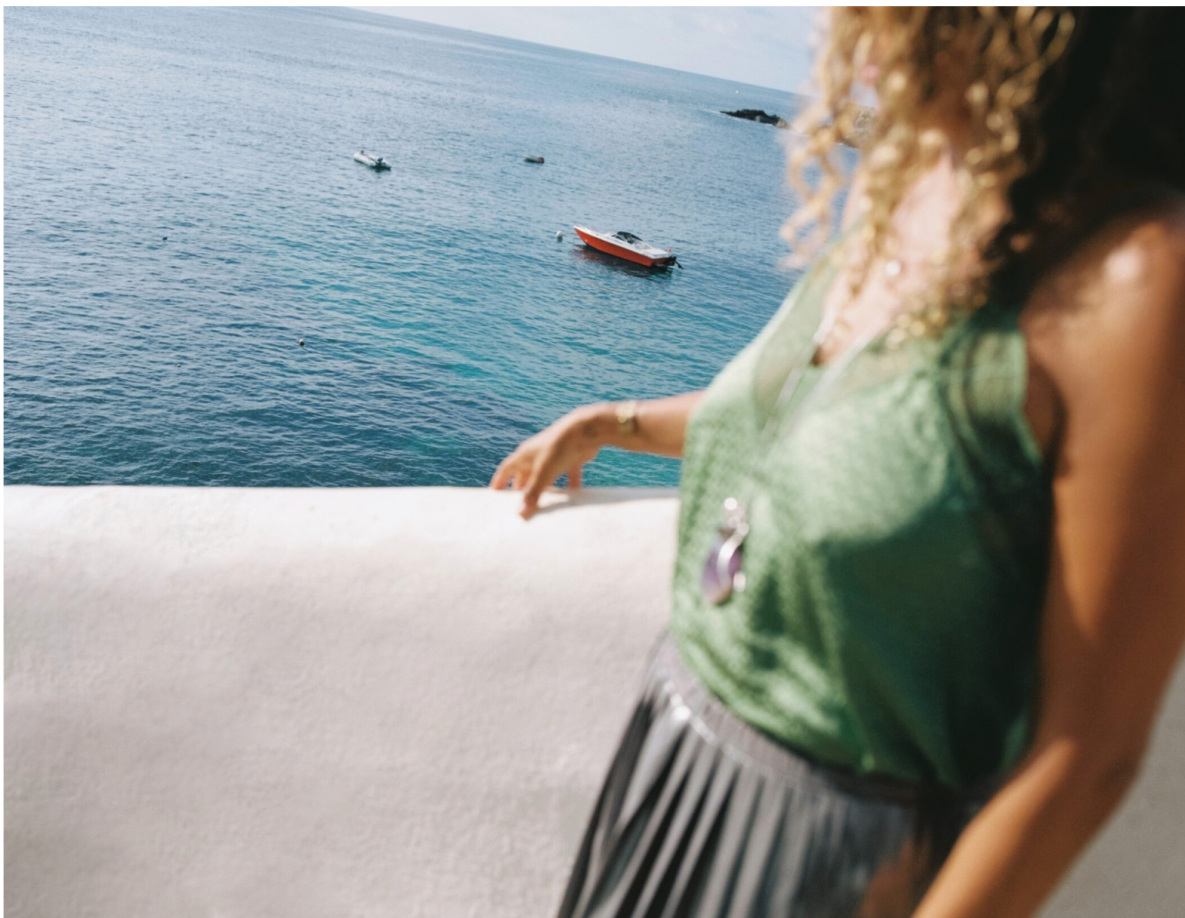


BODY AND MIND

## Changing Lanes

Mays Al-Ali reflects on letting go of a career in advertising to find her higher calling.

WORDS BY SKYE PARROTT, PHOTOGRAPHY BY IRIS HUMM



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**“MY CHANGE WAS** not a drastic, overnight thing. It was a long, long process over years. It was little baby steps, everything inching forward to where I was meant to be.”

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Mays Al-Ali is speaking these words from her apartment in Ibiza, where she now lives and works as a yoga teacher, [leading retreats](#) and consulting with clients as a naturopathic nutritionist. A London native, Al-Ali has been inching toward this new life for more than 10 years, but she only finally made the physical move last year, about six months into the pandemic. "I came here in September to host a yoga retreat, and then was like, actually, I can just stay here. So that's what happened. I stayed. I still haven't been back. I got warm clothes because it does get cold here in the winter, and rented my flat, shipped everything remotely. And here I am, nearly one year later, living my dream life in Ibiza."

The life she left behind in London was very different from the one she is leading now. And despite how deliberately she worked to escape it, it was also a life she worked very hard to have. Following university, Al-Ali was hired as a runner at the BBC, "making teas and coffees," before working her way up to become a successful advertising producer, "traveling the world with multi-million-pound campaigns."

When asked to describe that life, she has no trouble providing a single word: stressful. "In the years it took me to work my way up, it was all I wanted." But once Al-Ali got there, she found that what it had looked like was different from the actuality. Working at a top global advertising agency made self-care impossible. She describes a stress loop of crazy hours with boozy lunches, not eating properly or finding time for exercise, and terrible clashes with aggressive creative directors that left her shaken, one going so far as to become physically violent.

The day-to-day realities of the industry she was working in sapped her enthusiasm for the things that had drawn her to the industry to begin with. "I always loved traveling and discovering new places. And after a while, it was like, I don't want to go to these places. When you go away on shoots you have to work 12 hours a day, and you have to take the clients out at night, and night and day you're at the beck and call of the job. And it just became that I felt like, Oh I don't want two weeks in Buenos Aires, and, Oh no, don't make me go to Brazil."

At 30, she hit a wall. "My boyfriend dumped me. Things were difficult with my flatmate. Then I had a health condition, a lump removed from my neck. Everything went wrong at the same time." So she went to a yoga lesson. "I was doing Bikram, but sporadically. And I went to this class and I was in a really bad state, and I was lying in savasana, the final relaxation at the end, and this voice was like, You've got to do more of this."

Though she says she didn't understand where it was coming from or what it was, "I got the message." The experience catalyzed a search for yoga retreats in India, where she would be attending a wedding in



six months' time. All she could find were teacher trainings. "I reached out to one and asked, 'Could I come? I'm really inflexible.' I could barely touch my toes. I was stiff as a plank. And she was like, 'If you focus now for the next six months and practice every day, then yeah, you can come.'"

With this goal in mind, she began attending yoga regularly, taking a 6 a.m. class every morning. In order to do that, she had to stop drinking because being out late didn't complement the early start. Without drinking, she began to watch what she was eating. She began therapy to deal with what she describes as "serious trauma I had been numbing with the party lifestyle." This led to her quitting her abusive job and going freelance, which gave her less job security but allowed her more flexibility.



Six months later and more than able to touch her toes, she flew to India to attend a teacher training that she describes as truly life-changing. "I just realized that I really had to start looking after myself. And eating that food, doing yoga twice a day, meditating, chanting, pranayama breath work. It was a 13-hour-a-day schedule of amazing things to heal." When the training ended, she attended her friend's wedding and then accepted a job teaching yoga at a center in Goa. She was supposed to stay in India for six weeks, but it became six months. "I came back a different person, and my friends couldn't recognize me."

She spent the next five years splitting her time between London and

she spent the next five years splitting her time between London and India. In the summer, she would work in advertising in London to save enough money to spend the winters in India, where she trained in yoga and reiki. While the split life allowed her the means to pursue her training, the time she spent in London working in advertising became harder and harder to bear. She knew she wanted to pursue a degree in naturopathic nutrition, but she also couldn't imagine spending three straight years in London. She finally enrolled, completing two and a half years of the course while working full-time. "That was the second burnout," she says. "Doing a course about health ended up destroying my health."

Now Al-Ali was turning 40, and another relationship was coming to an end, broken down by failed IVF. She went alone to India for Christmas. "I'm a big believer in whatever you want to call it — God, the universe, spirituality, a higher power, angels. It's all the same thing. We have all the answers we need inside of us, and it's up to us to connect and tune into them, and be open to the messages. And the voice again was clear. Just don't go back to advertising. Don't go back. Don't go back."

The decision to walk away from advertising entirely was an act of faith. She realized it would require letting go not just of the security her job provided, but also the identity. "In London, it's like, 'Hi, I'm Mays, I'm a producer.' It was all I'd known for 18 years." But Al-Ali felt a trust that she would be taken care of, which she acknowledges was bolstered by the financial security she had created for herself through her savings. With a small nest egg in the bank, she returned to London and finished the last six months of her course. It is a decision that enabled her to graduate; the end of the course was so intense, she says, that she would not have been able to finish it while working a day job. Upon graduation, she immediately set up a clinic where she began seeing clients, and enrolled in a master's program. She also began hosting retreats, which brought her back to Ibiza, a place she had visited (and partied wildly in) when she was young. This time, she connected with the holistic community, and what she calls the "magnetic, spiritual energy" of the island.

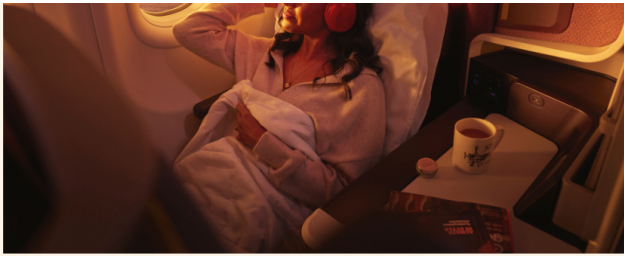


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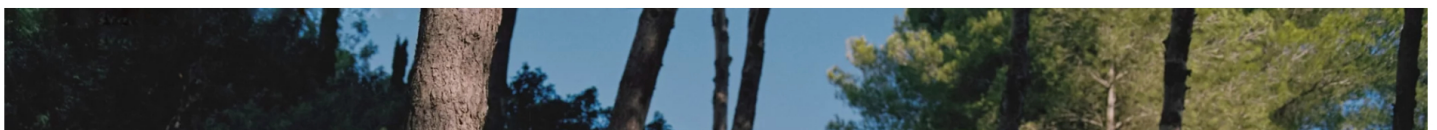
Though raised Muslim, Al-Ali says she felt entirely disconnected from religion and spirituality until she began doing yoga, chanting, and engaging in breath work. She credits those practices with “activating loads of things that science doesn’t understand — you can’t even quantify it. But it’s magic that’s happening. And that is

when I felt my spiritual connection.” While the external changes she has made in her life have been substantial, Al-Ali says that the greater ones have been those experienced on this spiritual level. How she sees the world has changed, along with her sense of her own purpose in it. “The big, huge, life-changing difference is being in service. That is something that was massively lacking from my life before. I was just helping sell stuff to people that they didn’t need.”

Unlike her previous job, which was not only stressful but often thankless, her current career allows her to see how she is making a positive impact. “When you’re hosting a retreat, people are traveling from around the world, and you’re looking after them. You’re making them feel good. And the reward at the end is when they’re like, ‘Thank you so much. You’ve changed my life.’ I can’t tell you how much that warms my heart. It’s just beautiful.”

This shift in values has also affected the way she thinks about a word like “cool.” “The definition of cool, in London and in New York, it’s the same: a cool, glamorous job, traveling the world, expense accounts, traveling first class, fancy lunches, what someone looks like, the designer clothes, the right hairstyle and the right shoes, and handbags and all this kind of stuff.” While the life she built for herself in advertising was focused on the pursuit of those things, now she says, “all those things are meaningless to me. I just wouldn’t dream of spending hundreds or thousands of pounds on designer clothes. I’d rather donate that money to charity. It’s just having different values. I judge a person on their heart and soul, not on what they’re wearing, and not on what they’re doing either.”

“If people are struggling and want to do something new, number one is finding out: What are your interests? What brings you joy?”





Though the changes she has made have been, ultimately, seismic, Al-Ali reiterates that they happened slowly, a “long, long process over years” rather than a “drastic, overnight thing.” For anyone looking to begin the process of making changes in their own life, big or small, Al-Ali has plenty of advice. “If people are struggling and want to do something new, number one is finding out: What are your interests? What brings you joy? Some people might not even know. That’s normal too. But a good way to find out is to take a little bit of time out. Everyone can take some time out. Change the scenery. On your own is ideal because you have space to think and get into some meditation. Spend time in nature, and ask for signs, ask for guidance, and nine times out of 10 you’ll get your answers when you get space to think about it.”

Al-Ali is also a tireless advocate for quieting the mind. “What I really recommend to my clients is to work towards a daily meditation practice, to delve into prayer, and delve into the spiritual. You don’t have to label it as religious or God or use any of those terms. But it’s just that connection to something bigger than yourself, and trying to feel into it, ultimately, that will give you that trust and faith.” ●

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Our Contributors

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Skye Parrott is the editor-in-chief of Departures. A magazine editor, photographer, writer, and creative consultant, she was previously a founder of the arts and culture journal Dossier, and editor-in-chief for the relaunch of Playgirl as a modern, feminist publication.

## Iris Humm Photographer

Based in Barcelona, Iris Humm was born and raised in Milan before moving to Spain to focus on photography. Humm began taking photographs at 15 years old and now applies her intimate and intuitive aesthetic to an impressive portfolio of brands and assignments. Humm describes her practice as communicating the emotional quality of a moment.

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