



'I swapped crack for meditation'

Addicted to crack and heroin by the age of 16, Natalie Hardy, now 25, couldn't see a way out of the squalid squats where she fed her habit. Could a gruelling detox in a Thai monastery work when other treatments failed?

Slumped on the filthy bathroom floor, I watched a cockroach scuttle over my pale hand. I smiled. What did I care that I was living in an infested squat? I was high on crack and grateful that I had somewhere to sleep that night. I'd been taking a cocktail of drugs for four years, but an addict? Not me. It didn't make any difference that every single day was spent scraping together the money I needed for my next fix.

A hand started caressing my thigh and I turned to see a man's pockmarked face leering over me. I reached towards the locked bathroom door, but the hands pulled me back. 'Get off me, you creep!' I bellowed as he grabbed hold of my clothes. Screaming, I tried to push him away, but he was too strong. Suddenly splinters flew as someone kicked the door open from the other side. Another squatter had heard my screams and dragged my attacker from the room. I stumbled out after them.

This was how low I'd sunk. Gazing in the mirror, a spectre stared back at me. I was gaunt, with black swollen patches beneath my eyes, and grey skin. Later my hair would fall out and my gums would bleed. I was just 19, yet I'd aged beyond my years.

I was a Swindon girl who'd had an idyllic childhood, with parents who had created a stable home for their only daughter – but now it seemed as if it had all been for nothing. I'd always had a rebellious streak. When I was 13, I started smoking cannabis. I thought it was just a bit of fun. But at 16, things took a more serious turn when my perfect life was turned upside down by a series of traumatic events. My best friend, Saul, had been travelling in a car driven by someone who was drunk. The driver had careered out of control and Saul had been killed.

Then my parents decided to divorce, and not long afterwards, my grandad, who I was very close to, died of a heart attack. I felt so alone. I just didn't know how to cope. By the time I got to sixth-form college I was getting drunk in the pub every afternoon. It was the perfect way to numb my feelings, which simmered dangerously beneath the surface.

One day, I was sitting at the bar when a good-looking young man walked in. His name was Jason*. He sauntered over to me and we got chatting. Not only was Jason gorgeous, he also seemed like a bit of a lost soul, something I could relate to. He'd had an abusive childhood and fled his home in Liverpool to live in a hostel. Yet there was an aura of freedom about him that I was attracted to. As he talked I noticed flashes of happiness, which in my sadness I wanted to latch on to. So we started seeing each other. After a couple of months, I dropped out of college and moved into a bedsit with him. Jason was the love of my life – or so I thought – and I just wanted to be with him.

I was so infatuated that I didn't worry about any of his drug-taking friends, and I wasn't even concerned when I saw Jason smoking crack, too. As long as I was with him, I didn't care

what we were doing. One day, he offered me his crack pipe. 'Why not?' I thought. 'Just this once.' I'd seen Jason after he'd taken it – his shoulders unknitting, the glazed eyes, all the cares falling from his face. And I wanted to see what it was like.

I was so naive – I had no idea that crack was a dangerous drug. It washed away all my fears and doubts and I felt euphoric. I started taking it again and again, trying to chase that very first super-high that I'd felt, but it was never the same again. It didn't stop me though. 'Surely I'll feel on top of the world when I get my next hit?' I thought, as Jason passed me yet another crack pipe.

Crack made me hyperactive, so to calm myself down, I turned to tranquillisers, sleeping pills and even heroin. Before long, heroin had me in its grip.

My mum and dad were desperately worried about me. 'Why don't you come home, love?' Mum suggested. 'You and Jason can come to stay if you like.' I needed to sort myself out, so I agreed. I got a job in a shop that sold health and beauty products and tried to cut down on my drug-taking. But it wasn't long before

'A matter of hours without crack, and already the desperate solitude in my life was eating away at me'

'If Jason goes, I go!' I said angrily. I couldn't bear to be without him, so, aged 18, I packed a bag and together we moved into a bedsit in Swindon. That's when Jason started dealing to fund our habit. The next few months swam past in a blur. Every day was the same, taking crack followed by a hit of heroin, which acted a bit like a tranquilliser. I was worn out and very ill. But when our landlord discovered Jason was dealing and told us to leave the bedsit, I had no choice but to follow him to a nearby squat.

The abandoned first-floor bedsit was totally squalid. Soiled mattresses covered the floor, torn curtains hung at the window and a fetid smell was thick in the air. People out of their minds on drugs lay around or stumbled in from the street below. Occasionally fights broke out, but I was too dazed to realise the danger I was putting myself in. All I could think about was my next fix and being with Jason, who was still everything to me. I kept my mobile phone with me and Mum rang me every week, but I was so wrapped up in the drugs that I was oblivious to the tortured pain in her voice.

Even after another addict had attacked me in the bathroom, I still didn't ask my mother

for help – I simply went to find Jason. But instead of telling him the truth about what had happened, I decided to lose myself by smoking yet more heroin.

Then one day, the police charged into the bedsit and arrested Jason and me. I was kept in the cells of the police station over the weekend and then taken to a holding cell underneath the magistrates' court. We were charged with conspiracy to supply class A drugs. I felt my heart racing as my solicitor told me there was an 80 per cent chance I'd be held in custody before my trial. I faced the very real prospect of spending years in prison.

I'd been given a dose of methadone to help keep my nerves together, but for the first time in all the years I'd been doing drugs, I was really terrified. I stared at the windowless concrete walls and my head started to spin.

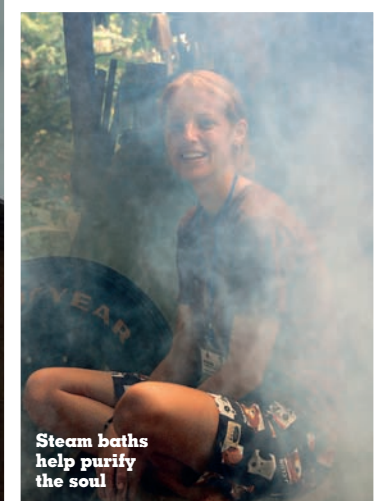
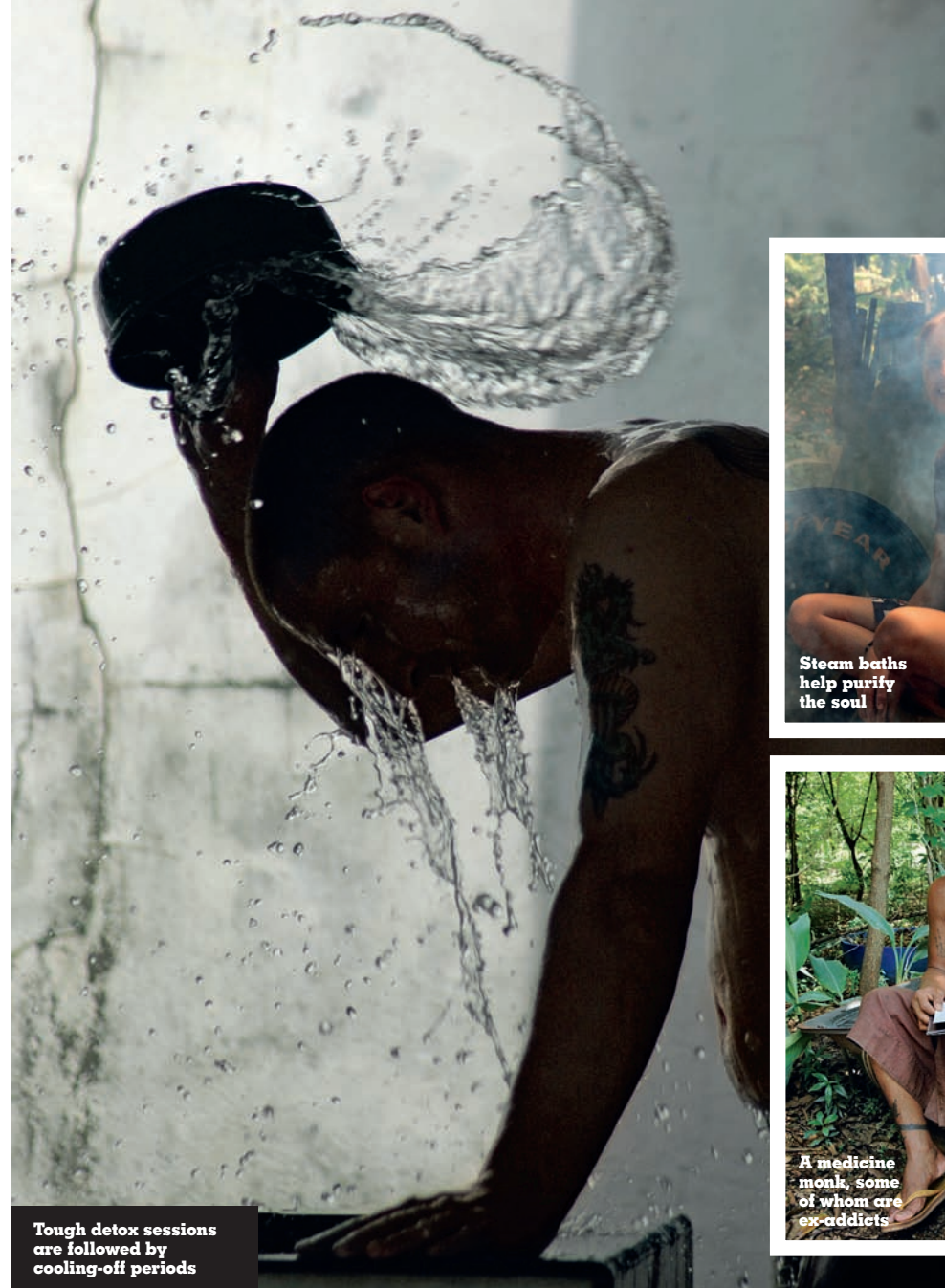
'I just want to be with Jason,' I said to myself. At that moment I felt totally alone. A matter of hours without crack and the desperate solitude in my life had already begun to eat away at me.

Standing in the dock beside Jason, I looked across the courtroom and saw my mum with tears streaming down her face. She'd agreed to let me come to live with her in Newbury – that way I was allowed out on bail while I waited for the →





From left: Natalie and her dogs; one of the 109 herbs; addicts in rehab; Buddha, a guiding light



Steam baths help purify the soul



A medicine monk, some of whom are ex-addicts

Tough detox sessions are followed by cooling-off periods

next court hearing. For a time at least, I could avoid going to prison.

When I looked at my mum, all I could see were the years of worry and strain etched all over her face. 'What has her only child done to her?' I thought. I felt deeply ashamed. 'I simply have to stop this,' I told myself. I fell into her arms and walked away from Jason, who was taken back down to the cells.

When I came back home to live with my mother, she had me referred to a drugs agency. 'I'm not a drug addict,' I kept on insisting, but she was determined. 'OK, Natalie, you're not a drug addict, but regularly seeing a counsellor will set you in good stead for your court case,' she urged. I carried on taking methadone and saw a drugs counsellor once a week in the local village hall. It was an incredible relief when a call came from my solicitor letting me know that the charge against me had been dropped due to a lack of evidence.

I kept in contact with Jason – the charges had been dropped against him, too. He was trying to kick his drug addiction, but finally we broke up. We'd tried to beat drugs together before and failed. This time, I wanted to go it alone.

Eventually, I met a drugs counsellor called Mike Sarson. He'd helped set up a drugs charity called East-West Detox, and was taking British addicts out to a monastery in Thailand to receive a free herbal detox that had been helping Thais for years. Mike warned me it was based around a tough regime of purging and vomiting, but he thought I'd be the perfect candidate.

I looked at the other options offered to me. I could either keep taking methadone, or join a long waiting list to go into a rehab clinic.

Six months later, and with the help of my family, I'd managed to pay for my flight to Thailand. There had to be other ways of getting clean than taking more drugs – even if they were legal ones – and I was willing to give it a go.

I was hugely nervous about leaving for Thailand, but instead of trying to calm myself, I fell into what came easiest to me and went out to score some heroin. Travelling into town by train, I spotted a dealer. When you've been addicted to drugs for as long as I had, you have this homing device that helps you pick out the dealers from a crowd just by the look on their face. One last hit and I felt wrapped up in a safety blanket again. The nerves just fell away.

The flight passed in a blur, but by the time I arrived in Thailand I was coming down off the heroin and the fear had kicked in again.

On 3 January 2003 I arrived at Thamkrabok monastery, up in the mountains about 140km

from Bangkok. I was 20 years old. The monks gave me a uniform of orange pyjamas to wear – all the addicts had to wear them to show that everyone was the same. A slogan was emblazoned on the back, which roughly translated as 'Winner'.

I was then told to take a *sajja* – a vow to stay drug-free – which I had to repeat in Thai after a monk had said the words to me. It took about four minutes for me to make the pledge, and although I didn't realise it at the time, it was an undertaking that would go on to resonate with me for ever.

I was shown to my 'bed', which was really just a mat in a room with lots of other addicts. The conditions were very basic, but I was too exhausted to care, and passed out. Then, at 5pm, I was shaken awake by one of the monks. Confused and disorientated, I followed him to a room where lots of addicts waited by a long drain. The monk silently handed me a phial of dark liquid, which was the monastery's secret blend of 109 detoxifying herbs. 'This is what you're here for,' I told myself. I squeezed my eyes shut and gulped it down, followed by a long drink of water.

I saw some of the other addicts projectile vomiting, and started to think it wasn't going to work for me, but a monk kept patting my back and telling me to drink water. Then my body was racked by a convulsion and dark liquid came jetting out of my mouth. This practice of drinking water and vomiting went on for about half an hour. 'What the hell am I doing?' I thought. I felt absolutely dreadful, but deep down I knew I was being cleansed.

Over the next five days I repeated the process four more times, rising at 5am to drink the putrid mix of herbs that was drawing the toxins out of me. The huge amounts of water I was swallowing would then make me vomit so the toxins could be ejected from my body.

Each day after the vomiting episodes, I had a rest on my mat, and then I would chat with the monks about my symptoms. Two days after I'd taken my first phial of herbs, I was plagued with withdrawal symptoms. I had cramps in my legs, and my body felt as though it was being

jolted by electric shocks. I suffered cold sweats and it felt like bugs were wriggling around inside me. I couldn't sleep at all. In short, it was torture. But there was nowhere to run to. Here at Thamkrabok, which means 'cave of the teaching', I had to face up to reality. I told myself that this was going to help me and I just had to get through it.

Without the numbing effect of the drugs, it was as if I'd been sleepwalking for years and was now suddenly waking up to my emotions. I had lots of mood swings. Sometimes I'd start crying for no reason, while at other times, I'd be shaking with laughter. But most of the time, I was happier than I'd ever been.

Once the first week was over, I began to relax. There were no other women at Thamkrabok during my stay, but the other addicts, who were all Thai men, made me feel like I belonged, even though we couldn't speak each other's languages. We'd sit and try to communicate, then giggle at our gestures to one another.

While I was withdrawing from the drugs I'd gone days without being able to snatch more than five minutes' sleep, but finally I was able to rest properly again. Every day I swept leaves in the courtyard, which all addicts do to focus their minds. It's called sweeping meditation and is designed to train your concentration, keep your energy flowing and prevent boredom. I also took part in daily meditation rituals that helped to calm my mind when I felt anxious or jittery. Often I would take steam baths in my orange pyjamas (keeping covered up as a sign of respect) while a monk added freshly gathered herbs to the water. I was also given special herbal teas to drink and had daily Thai massages, which helped to relax me.

I learned that some of the monks had first been to Thamkrabok as addicts themselves, and it was incredibly inspiring to see them healthy and happy. There were more than 100 monks in the monastery and about 25 nuns. Only about 10 monks at a time worked in the detox area where I was.

During the monks' evening chanting sessions at the communal shrine, I began to notice that the positivity of the place, and the amazing work that was happening there, seemed to shine through. For the first time since I'd been at the retreat, I began to think about the spiritual side of life, and although I didn't become religious, I started to feel that there was a higher power looking after me. I'd reached rock bottom, but had been given a second chance at life. As I walked around Thamkrabok, I could feel this power

surrounding me like an aura of harmony. Soon I began to feel like my old self again.

But after a month, it was time to go home to England. I sobbed to the monastery's abbot and told him that I was scared I'd slip back into my old habits. Calmly, he told me to write down a mantra on a piece of paper, saying that I believed and trusted in my own strength and the greater powers, and that I'd be able to stay drug-free. He told me to take this back home with me and read it aloud several times a day for a week, then to swallow the paper to keep the commitment inside me. Next he drew a religious symbol on my back and told me he could see I was a messenger who was here to help other addicts. That reassurance meant I went home feeling much stronger.

It was hard, though. I'd go into town and see the dealers I used to know. They offered me drugs every time. It felt empowering to be able to say 'no', but I was terrified that one day I'd give in. And I missed Thamkrabok. I longed for the calm, loving atmosphere and the positive people. I spoke to the abbot once a week and, as if he sensed my feelings, he

asked if I wanted to go back to Thamkrabok and work as a helper for the female addicts and the Westerners. I didn't hesitate to say yes – I felt as though I was going home. I spent the next few weeks temping in offices and bars to scrape together the airfare, with the help of my parents. Two months after I'd left I returned to the monastery, where I would work for the next four years.

From that point onwards, I helped around 20 Western women and up to 25 Thai women

each year through the detoxifying process at the monastery, as well as a number of Western men. It helped that I could speak English, and before long I learnt to speak Thai, too. It was a truly humbling experience to see people who were in the position that I was once in, looking so ill and utterly desperate. But ultimately it was uplifting watching all these people emerge from the most miserable time in their life. If I found anything difficult, I spoke to the abbot about my feelings, instead of keeping them locked up the way I used to. And listening to the monks chanting soothed my mind more than the drugs ever could.

At around Christmas last year, I made the decision to come back to England and returned at the end of February. My work at Thamkrabok had always been voluntary, and I know that if funding became available for me to work at Thamkrabok properly I'd be back like a shot. But right now, I'd like to study while I'm still young.

In May I began an Open University course, which could later count towards a psychology and criminology degree. I'm still in contact with the monks at the monastery. I regularly send them emails, text messages and little cards, and I feel very excited whenever a letter arrives from one of my now dear friends. Meditation is something I still do every day, saying my secret mantra over and over again. Thamkrabok is in my soul and I'd go back there if they needed my help again. But for now, I'm making plans for the future I thought I might never have. **SPIRITS: DESTINY**

HERBS AND HOPE FOR ADDICTS

Thamkrabok monastery was established in 1957 by Luangpor Charoen Parnchand – now the abbot – and his brother, and the detoxifying herbal recipe came to their sister in a vision. Thamkrabok claims around 70 per cent of addicts stay clean after their detox, compared with an average of 20 per cent in conventional detox clinics. A number of people have been sponsored through the NHS, as once flights are paid for the monastery doesn't charge for treatment. It only asks that people living with them pay a few pounds a day towards food and accommodation. Natalie and other workers hope that one day this treatment for addicts will be available in the UK as an alternative to the medication that's currently on offer. To find out more, call East-West Detox on 0118-962 3332 or visit www.east-westdetox.org.uk