



# HEALTHY ESCAPES

Unplugged Getaways Rebalance Our Lives

by Judith Fertig

When Jeanna Freeman vacationed at Earthshine Mountain Lodge, in Lake Toxaway, North Carolina, she wasn't sure what to expect. Touted as a "techno-amenity-free property," it specializes in off-the-grid getaways ([EarthshineLodge.com](http://EarthshineLodge.com)), meaning no in-room TV and a chance to digitally detox. Guests are encouraged to ditch their cell phones and laptops in favor of a zip line adventure through the Smoky Mountains forest canopy and laid back log cabin informality.

"Honestly, it was exhilarating being away from my cell phone," admits Freeman, an interior designer from Collierville, Tennessee. "I hadn't felt that good and 'connected' in a long time. I didn't realize how much I needed that."

Her experience highlights the new buzzwords and phrases in vacation travel: unplug, reconnect, digital detox and healthy escape. What is it about

unplugging that seems so refreshing and like an ideal vacation?

Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, explains that, "Using the Internet pushes us to a skimming and scanning form of thinking." He occasionally unplugs to recover his attention span, noting, "A lot of our deepest thoughts only emerge when we're able to pay attention to one thing."

For memoirist Pico Iyer, author of *The Man Within My Head*, "The urgency of slowing down—to find the time and space to think—is nothing new." What is new is figuring out workable definitions of stillness and movement when we spend a lot of our time physically still, but mentally in motion.

A noted travel writer for 20 years, Iyer likes to stay at monasteries around the world. He concludes, "Wiser souls have always reminded us that the more attention we pay to the moment, the

less time and energy we have to expend to place it in some larger context." We can just simply be.

Healthy vacation escapes help us do just that. We regenerate, reconnect with ourselves and others and re-imagine our lives in a more satisfying context.

## Personal Growth: The Mind

MJ Goff was on a magazine writing assignment the first time she visited the Omega Institute, in Rhinebeck, New York ([eOmega.org](http://eOmega.org)). As a student of New Age theories and a potential yoga teacher, Goff says she welcomed the opportunity to learn more. Once she attended the women's retreat she was researching, she was hooked. "Every year since, I find myself being drawn to Omega for its promotion of meditation and overall encouragement of 'staying in the present,'" she says. "All the programs stem from one mission: to keep us on the right path."

Talks by internationally known speakers such as Joan Borysenko, Eckhart Tolle, Harville Hendrix and Daniel Amen are complemented by sessions in nurturing creativity, holistic health, and yoga practice. "People smile, but also keep to themselves," explains Goff. "It's a place for quieting your mind."

For shorter getaways, Hay House, headquartered in Carlsbad, California, sponsors weekend I Can Do It! seminars in various cities ([HayHouse.com](http://HayHouse.com)). Speakers such as Louise Hay, Gregg Braden, Wayne Dyer and Caroline Myss help attendees nudge closer to making milestone transformations, consciousness shifts and progress on their healing journeys.

Sometimes, personal growth simply involves sufficient quiet time to walk, contemplate and reconnect with our muse. "The real meaning of the word 'retreat' in the spiritual sense," says Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, "is stepping back. When one steps back, one gets a better view of the world, others and our deepest self."

Iyer finds solace at New Camaldoli Heritage, a Benedictine community amidst the rugged terrain of Big Sur, California ([Contemplation.com](http://Contemplation.com)). More

than 2,000 monasteries and other spiritual communities throughout North America offer off-the-beaten-path retreats at reasonable prices and generally welcome guests of all religions and spiritual practices. The one requirement is that guests not disturb others.

At Ghost Ranch, in the high desert of Abiquiu, New Mexico, "The scenery alone is spiritual and healing," relates Nancy Early, a New York film producer. Under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church, activities encourage individual and social transformation (*NewMexico-GhostRanch.org*). Early says the best part is, "There's one pay phone, and cell phones don't work here; no TV or radio. You walk away from everything that controls your life."

### Optimal Wellness: Mind/Body

Sometimes the healthy escape we seek can be found at a destination spa, which combines enough structure to slowly wean us from daily busyness with sufficient soothing, quiet spaces and physical nurturing.

For Debbie Phillips—who spends part of the year in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and the other part in Naples, Florida—one visit to a spa was all it took. As an executive and life coach, Phillips founded Women on Fire in 2003 to connect her "on fire" clients with each other via regional meetings and a free online newsletter, and discovered that the condition sometimes crosses the line into overwork.

"My first visit to a spa more than 20 years ago was when I first learned about the life-changing benefits of taking better care of myself. In addition to the soothing amenities, the peace, calm and quiet usually found at a spa—space to think, nap, read a book or gaze into the sky—often results in 'less' becoming 'more' in your life," Phillips says. "I have returned home feeling lighter and brighter and even more excited for what is next. The experience gave me just the boost I needed to keep going."

Recently, Phillips discovered simple techniques to nurture herself all year long by attending a breathing and meditation class at the Lake Austin Spa, in Texas. "Now I start each day with long, deep breaths before I

even get out of bed," she says. "It is so simple, so calming and establishes my day with peace."

Virginia Nelson, a San Diego, California, attorney, likewise revels in her twice-yearly visits to Canyon Ranch, in Tucson, Arizona. "The pace in southern California is like running a marathon every day. My visits serve as respites that have allowed me to keep up with it this long.

"I first went in 1991 and saw a place to go and cocoon," recounts Nelson, "but I also discovered incredible fitness and education classes." The spa is essentially a reset button for her. "It's rest, rejuvenation and reinvention." Canyon Ranch has several U.S. locations (*CanyonRanch.com*).

Some facilities feature niche mind/body experiences, such as the psychic massage or chakra balancing at Mii Amo Spa, in Sedona, Arizona (*EnchantmentResort.com*). Others specialize in holistic wellness. Tucson's Miraval Resort, in Arizona, offers an integrative wellness program guided by Dr. Andrew Weil (*Tinyurl.com/6p2l237*). Chill-out spa services like a hot stone massage are often balanced by breath walking, qigong or desert tightrope walking.

### Active Adventure: The Body

Finding a clear stillpoint of one's soul can also occur while moving and challenging our bodies. Exercise helps us break through not only physical boundaries, but emotional and spiritual barriers, as well.

Barbara Bartocci, a long-distance cyclist and author of *Meditation in Motion*, maintains that moving keeps both our brains and bodies healthier. "Research at The University of Arizona found that regular exercise appears to preserve key parts of the brain involved in attention and memory," she notes. "It is well known that exercise helps to reduce anxiety, allay depression and generally improve mood, by prompting our bodies to release more endorphins."

Bartocci has experienced the power of these connections firsthand. "Active vacations are truly transformative," she says emphatically. "When I bicycled across Iowa on RAGBRAI [*The Des*

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*Moines Register's* Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa], we cycled 76 miles one day on hills with a constant 20-mile-per-hour headwind. It was a tough day, but I made it! My divorce was becoming final that summer, and completing that day gave me the encouraging inner message: 'If I can cycle Iowa on the toughest day, I can re-cycle my life after divorce.'" She's still moving along. Recently, she joined 500 other cyclists doing 60 miles a day for a week in Wisconsin.

Bill Murphy, of Annapolis, Maryland, made his breakthrough at the Boulder Outdoor Survival School ([boss-inc.com](http://boss-inc.com)). "While I wanted an adventure and to put myself out there, I also wanted to know that I was in good hands," he says about why he chose a guided trip. Murphy was already in good shape, having competed in a local Ironman event. Following an initial fitness assessment that involved testing his heart rate after running at high altitude, he was deemed fit to take part in an outdoor survival experience in Utah's desert country. With a knife, wool jacket, cap, gloves, long underwear and suitable shoes—but no tent, sleeping bag or food—his group learned to live off the land with the assistance of three instructors in an initial phase of the program.

"After two days we were given our backpack with the critical blanket, poncho and food rations. I have never been so happy to hear the words '1,500 calories' in my life, and though I have

eaten at some wonderful restaurants, the soups we made with those rations tasted better than anything I have eaten in my life," he says.

Murphy learned how to purify water, make a tent from his poncho, start a fire with minimal tools and bed down in the cold without a sleeping bag or blanket. A crucial part of the survival training was the need to go even further when the group thought their adventure had ended. "We didn't know whether that would be in 10 miles or 30," he recalls. His ability to physically push past the mentally established timeframe led Murphy to see that he could also move beyond his either/or boundaries: either family or business; either business or adventure. "I realized that I don't have to choose one over the other. I feel a better sense of balance now."

In other parts of the country, Outward Bound Adult Renewal also offers new experiences that test physical limits and present breakthrough opportunities ([OutwardBound.org](http://OutwardBound.org)). It's also known for programs that help teens get a better handle on life. Participants often rock climb the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia or sea kayak along the Pacific Northwest or North Carolina's Outer Banks. Options for growth and renewal appear endless.

Nearby or far away, for a few days or longer, a healthy escape can be truly restorative.

*Judith Fertig regularly contributes to Natural Awakenings.*