

Off-the-couch therapy: healing hits the road

VACATIONS INTRINSICALLY HAVE therapeutic value as a break from everyday routine and the rigours of the workplace. Yet some get-aways deliver healing properties far beyond simple rest and relaxation (the number one reason Canadians take holidays according to a 2009 Statistics Canada study). Unlike a sun-and-surf holiday, these so-called therapy vacations involve curative, educational and/or inspirational agendas that will ideally send one home beaming with rude good health and fired up with a zest for living.

The average armchair sports fan could argue that following a favourite pro hockey team on a roadtrip qualifies as a therapy vacation. But customized therapeutic travel can go much deeper by boosting health and wellness through life-enhancing activities, shared adventures and the skills of health professionals – massage therapists, yoga instructors and rousing speakers to name a few.

Quality time facedown on a massage table or toes up in a thalassotherapy (salt water) pool at spa resorts worldwide appeal to those with the cash to splash out on deluxe pampering. Some, like Bali's award-winning Ayana Resort, specialize in pure luxury while others offer case-specific medical treatments. The Hills Health Ranch near Williams Lake, B.C., runs wellness, weight loss and smoking cessation programs. Closer to home, the Temple Gardens Mineral Spa Resort Hotel in Moose Jaw offers revitalizing soaks in its indoor and outdoor mineral pools as well as spa treatments. Just say *aaah*.

Yoga holidays are all the rage these days as enthusiasts travel far and wide for intensive retreats with certified teachers. Most typically feature twice-daily classes, healthy food and free time to explore. Case in point: a week with A-list yoga celebrity Rodney Yee at Costa Rica's Blue Spirit Retreat in March 2011.

Those interested in meditation, personal development and spirituality have their pick of remote spots such as Hollyhock on Cortes Island, B.C., the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in rural Massachusetts and the granddaddy of such retreat centres, the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. All offer residential workshops in transpersonal psychology,

creativity, dance and the visual arts. Study with big names such as Eckhart Tolle, Buddhist meditation leader Jack Kornfield or Julia "The Artist's Way" Cameron, then return to reality with a body-mind makeover.


Some therapy vacations serve travellers who are either directly or indirectly dealing with disease. Recovering alcoholics, for instance, are welcome at Renovatio, a clean and sober B&B in Portugal's Algarve beachfront region that lines up AA meetings for its guests. Women living with cancer travel together on trips to Tuscany, Paris and elsewhere organized by Seattle-based Travel Toward Wellness. Adults with mental and physical disabilities embark on group holidays hosted by Trips Inc., in Eugene, Oregon.

"People struggling with the same health issues can benefit from spending time together," says Kelly Walker, a respected inspirational author from Stratford, Ontario. He's the keynote speaker on Journey for Life, a February 2011 cruise for cancer survivors and their caregivers and friends that will raise funds for the Canadian Cancer Society's Saskatchewan branch. Some 200 berths aboard Holland America's ms *Oosterdam* have been reserved for a 10-day excursion sailing from

San Diego to Puerto Vallarta and back. Workshops at sea will be led by Walker and cancer specialist Wendy McDermid. During port layovers, participants can sign up for whale-watching and zipline adventures.

"We announced the trip at the Living with Cancer Conference in Saskatoon in the spring, and the feedback was incredible," says Claude-Jean Harel, founder of CAA Saskatchewan's Great Excursions boutique travel company. "Yes, people liked the idea of a cruise during the worst of winter. But more important is the prospect of celebrating their individual journeys together."

All travel can be therapeutic, acknowledges the jovial Walker, 68, a prostate cancer survivor himself and professional musician (he's toured with Irish harpist Mary O'Hara) who spent the first 20 years of his adult life as a Dominican friar. "I guess that's why it's said that travel is good for the soul." Strapping himself to a zipline will be adventure aplenty for Walker. "I'm tight-assed and afraid of heights," he laughs, "but if these brave folks can do it, then I'm ready to face my own fears and give it a shot. That's what healing is all about." ■ —Jeff Bateman

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