

Travel



Fair exchange

The beginner's guide to house swapping PAGE 4

Queen of the Swiss Riviera

Why Montreux was Freddie Mercury's favourite town PAGE 5

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GETTY IMAGES



What is wrong with the following sentence? "I am a high-achieving and successful person who has gained recognition for my work and has the respect of others."

Quite a lot it would seem judging from the group of dissatisfied high-achievers I found myself among in La Montaña Mágica, a comfortable, remote farmhouse looking across to the peaks of northern Spain's Picos de Europa. Our group included a university lecturer wanting a new challenge, a couple looking to make a more substantial contribution to the "planet's wellbeing", a high-flying PR exec thinking about freelancing, and a young, highly paid banker considering becoming a poorly paid artist, plus two life coaches, Rosie Walford and Bernie Evans.

Walford's company, The Big Stretch, was designed to help people looking to make a life-change through a combination of creative workshops and a good stomp around the great outdoors. There is nothing touchy feely about her. With an MA in experimental psychology from Oxford University, a creative consultant for the likes of the Body Shop and the BBC, and a background in advertising, she gives seriously savvy and practical business advice, with the focus on worked-through plans you can realistically implement once the holiday buzz wears off.

"It's easy to think big when your vista is a mountain gorge, which is why we do it here," says Walford, "but you need to have a concrete plan to stick to when you get back in the thick of real life." So no woolly chats about your childhood; this is a place for doers, something borne out by the other group members.

Our holiday-to-change-your-life worked like this: group-brainstorming sessions were followed by physical activities such as walking or kayaking, which apparently help the brain enter the "alpha stage". Your conscious mind is focused on the activity, allowing it to connect with your subconscious mind, where solutions and ideas begin to make themselves apparent. After you've had your light-bulb moment, you spend the remaining few days working on applying the strategies to your real-life situation.

I liked the theory, but I am a complete cynic. Even the hardest heart, however, would have to be moved by the dramatic Picos region, a couple of hours west of Bilbao. Our first walk took us lush meadows interlarded with crags and watered by pristine rivers. We trooped merrily along, chatting and laughing, until we reached a clearing where our affable guide Diego produced a sumptuous picnic of chorizo, bread, Spanish olive oil and cheese. Much hilarity and ice-breaking ensued as we passed around his goatskin of Rioja. Then Bernie Evans asked us to lie in the grass as he took us through a relaxation technique. The

Continued overleaf

HOLIDAYS TO CLEAR YOUR HEAD

Lisa Helmanis was sceptical about the benefits of life coaching, but a week of walking, talking and relaxing in the Picos mountains soon changed her mind

'One woman had such a moment of clarity she burst into tears'

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next thing I knew I was being woken up and told to walk back in single file, no chatting allowed.

This was the beginning of my performance anxiety. I tried to think deep thoughts but found myself writing mental shopping lists. Then the most extraordinary thing happened. A few feet in front of me a wild horse broke through the trees and joined our silent procession. Now, it could have been the Rioja, but I felt something profound going on. Was I becoming "stretchy"? Others definitely were. One woman had such a moment of clarity she burst into tears. Past stretches have included a lawyer who decided to set up a trust for young lawyers, someone looking to move an unwilling family out of London (they now live in the Scottish Highlands), a man working at the Home Office who now manages a Kenyan refugee programme in Nairobi, and a businesswoman lacking confidence who attributes her doubled profits directly to The Big Stretch.

I confessed my concerns to Rosie Walford the following day as we strolled through the stunning Cares Gorge, which revealed an inspiring new panorama at every turn. She was sanguine.

"Everyone's mind works differently. You could wake up in six months with an answer to a question you asked here. And more often than not, people usually work on entirely different questions to the one they came with."

Which is not to say they don't push you to help you have your "Aha!" moment. This is not a break for those looking for rest; they keep you at it with workshops, one-on-one coaching sessions, mind mapping (drawing diagrams of your life to see what's lacking) and 9am starts. Then there are the activities. But the stay is comfortable, with luxurious rooms and fabulous food and wine, and there is plenty to enjoy in the hillside villages and countryside.

Our final night was spent in a converted 17th-century palace, the Torre de Ruesiga, the ideal soft landing for our bump back into reality. Amid the good-natured clink of gin and tonics on the terrace, numbers were swapped and promises made.

My inner cynic won't like this, but yes, my life has changed. I feel more confident, I have a better idea of what I want next and since returning home I have even managed to implement a few of my ideas. And I've got a photo of the soaring Picos in my wallet so I don't forget to aim high.

The Big Stretch (book through *Pure Adventure*, 02273 876712; www.thebigstretch.com) costs from £1,650 per person, per week, including accommodation, all meals (including restaurants), mountain guide, transfers and individual work with two full-time coaches. Flights are not included, but Easyjet (0870 600 0000; www.easyjet.com) flies to Bilbao from £50.



MAKE A DIFFERENCE Clockwise from above, change your life by spending time at the Mayr Clinic, in the Picos mountains, among the poor in Tamil Nadu or simply by getting fit in the great outdoors

How to save money, yourself and the planet

IMPROVE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

Celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, the holistic travel company Skyros, based on the pretty Greek island of the same name, claims some impressive life-change tutors: past gurus have included novelists Margaret Drabble and Hanif Kureishi, broadcaster Mariella Frostrup, musician Beth Orton and dramatist Stephen Berkoff.

Learn how to improve your relationship with your partner, your family and even yourself through courses such as "How to have a truly lasting supportive relationship" and "Opening the heart". Group sessions of around 14 people think about how their personal relationships have worked in the past and how they would like them to be in the future. Psychotherapists look for patterns, then show you how to change your behaviour to get you the results you want. Couples are welcome.

There are more than 200 courses, covering everything from Pilates to poetry, and each holiday includes up to four courses daily, four days a week. Holidays at Skyros (020 7267 4424; www.skyros.com) cost

from £725 for two weeks, including all courses, half board and activities. Hellenic Travel (020 7267 7094) offers direct flights from Stansted to Skyros from £280 return.

MAKE MONEY

How much do you generate with your passive income? Not even sure what passive income is? (A business that will generate revenue with minimum effort.) That's because you haven't breakfasted with one of Britain's most useful landladies, "wealth coach" Nicola Cairncross. Her b&b in Worthing, West Sussex, offers the usual comforts, as well as extras such as contemporary art, internet access and a CD library. Cairncross came from the music industry and, after she realised she wasn't going to make any serious money, started looking for a life coach to find a new career. She found she was particularly interested in the relationship most people have with money, and now helps others develop financial skills through her "financial intelligence programme".

"Most people are frightened of money so keep things vague," says Cairncross, "so I help them

demystify the process and start making proper plans. Anyone can make money, they just need to understand how it works."

Using her "four lanes of the wealth highway" - property, the stock market, internet and building a business - you are supposed to start thinking like a business person. Stay and take a free introductory session, preferably over a great breakfast in the pretty breakfast room. Or make a bigger commitment to your bank balance through online workshops or individual coaching sessions. *The Arcaia*, 5-7 Warwick Gardens, Worthing, BN11 1PE (0870 710 7313; www.thearcaia.com; b&b from £35).

GET FIT

If you sit on the sofa guiltily glancing at those new trainers still in the box, you need help kick-starting your regime. Wild Fitness will take you in hand, promising that you will see results after only a week. The week-long courses run in the French Alps, and start with a full fitness assessment. Each group consists of eight-14 people of varying fitness levels, from complete beginners to athletes training for specific goals. Your

regime will be based on factors as diverse as posture, metabolic rate and lifestyle.

Born and brought up in Kenya, founder Tara Wood uses the natural environment to exercise (her organisation also runs Kenyan Wild Fitness, which uses the beach as a gym). She is also qualified in Corrective High-Performance Exercise Kinesiology - holistic health to you and me. The course programme means you should always be able to create a regime wherever you are, which means you can forget using the excuse that you can't get to the gym. Typical activities include mountain-biking, swimming in lakes, running, yogs, circuit-training, hill sprints, stretches and basic fitness exercises. You live well, too, staying in wooden Alpine-like chalets and eating good, organic food.

Wild Fitness (020 7368 1632; www.wildfitness.com) trips cost from £1,295 per person, based on two sharing, including full board, transfers, fitness and health assessments (including programmes to take away), massage, yoga, training sessions and workshops. Courses are based in France from June to August, and in Kenya in winter. Flights are not included but Easyjet (0871 248 0000; www.easyjet.com) has flights from Gatwick to Geneva from £52.

MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE

The Earth Watch Institute, an environmental charity, offers the chance for you to get involved with important research and conservation programmes. Projects

these are serious research projects and if you've ever harboured desires to give it all up and do something more worthy, it's a great way to check out the reality. *Earthwatch* (01865 318838, www.earthwatch.org) projects, such as monitoring butterflies of the lush Tam Dao National Park, Vietnam, cost £995 for two weeks, including food and accommodation but excluding flights and insurance. If you'd like to help but can't stretch that far, prices start from £50 for a Natural History Museum Botany Workshop.

KICK YOUR BAD HABITS

It's not unusual to go on holiday to get away from bad habits, but why not take the

therapies and yoga are also available. *Holistic Holidays* (020 7692 0633; www.hoho.co.uk) offers Lanzarote one-week therapy breaks from £445 per person, based on two sharing, including all meals and five daily yoga sessions. Return flights with Monarch (0870 458 2841; www.fly-crown.com) to Lanzarote from most UK airports start at £111.

BECOME MORE SOPHISTICATED

Have you ever wanted to walk into a soiree and play the piano elegantly? Or choose a bottle of wine the sommelier hasn't forced on you? The Crystal Cruises' Creative Learning Institute offers educational

instance, take in prominent architectural capitals such as London, St Petersburg and Venice. The ships themselves are among the most luxurious afloat, with grand lounges, spas, swimming pools, extensive exercise facilities and complimentary golf, yoga and Pilates instruction.

A nine-night "Caribbean Sunsets" fly/cruise (020 7287 9040; www.crystalcruises.com) costs from £1,675 per person (based on double occupancy), including return flights from the UK, transfers, one night's accommodation before the cruise, seven nights on the *Crystal Harmony* with all meals and soft drinks, port taxes and basic gratuities. The cruise starts and finishes in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and ports of call include Key West, Cozumel (Mexico) and New Providence and Grand Bahama (The Bahamas).

LOSE WEIGHT

Dry bread and milk? It may not sound fun, but it's worth a try if you are desperate to shift the pounds. On this southern Austrian holiday you are sent straight to a doctor for a full MOT and then given a tailored exercise programme followed by consultations, where you are taught to treat your body with some respect.

After an initial detox, you learn all kinds of food tricks (such as chewing 40 times before you swallow), optimum times to eat and your body's specific needs. There are also classes on food and nutrition. To make sure that you can keep up the good work on your return, cookery classes are also



SHIP SHAPE Learn new skills then hit the spa on a cruise

habits with you and leave them there? With just 19

programmes covering Arts & Entertainment,

Stay in the fabled city by the foothills of the Atlas Mountains

Mystical MARRAKECH

Marrakech is a wonderfully relaxing place to unwind, because of its warmth of climate, the medley of its palm groves and the scenic splendour of the Atlas Mountains. It is also a fascinating

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