

Spiritual tourist

Struggling to find her way out of an emotional impasse, novelist Louise Voss finds the perspective she needs on a mountain in Spain

I wasn't entirely convinced that a life-coaching holiday would give me, in one week, the clarity and focus for which I'd been desperately searching for a year. But a trip to the beautiful Picos de Europa mountains of northern Spain, hiking by day and relaxing in luxury at night? Surely, it couldn't hurt. And I knew I needed help.

I left my marriage last summer, almost literally running away from confronting the problems that had been sneaking up on us for several years. The speed of it was probably accelerated by the fact that I'd had a miscarriage some months earlier. But it had been, in most ways, a good marriage, and I have nothing but liking and respect for my husband. I don't really know what happened. After my miscarriage, I'd shut down emotionally and, since we were both masters of non-confrontation, the situation was never addressed. Then, in my woeful attempt at escapism, I launched into a new relationship, far too soon. The extent of my dilemma – to go back and work at the marriage, or to give the new man a fair chance – didn't fully hit me until some months later, and then it floored me, utterly.

I was also struck by a terrible sense of déjà vu: the novel I'd been

writing before and during my break-up, *Lifesaver*, focused on a crumbling marriage, the loss of a baby, and the dilemma of being stuck between two men. It now seemed horribly prophetic; I felt as though, by articulating what was (at least to begin with) a hypothetical situation, I had somehow brought it upon myself.

My husband said that the worst part of the whole thing wasn't my opting out of the marriage, but the fact that, three times, I'd said I wanted to try again, only to change my mind. In the mean time, my new man was being patient to the point of saintliness. But I'd pushed him away so much that it was – inevitably – beginning to damage our relationship, too.

The Big Stretch website states that the holiday is not recommended for the 'emotionally fragile'. This, of course, makes sense – coaching is not therapy – and after all the turmoil of the past months, I felt concerned that perhaps I oughtn't to be there. I felt so emotionally fragile that I could have shattered all over the floor.

But I wanted to go. Something needed to change: I had to get out of this awful limbo. It was affecting everything – my sleep, my

On life coaching

- A life coach helps you make changes in your life. They will show you how to move forward and see another perspective. They cannot help you unless you are willing to change.
- Most coaches work on the phone, although some do it face-to-face. Expect actions to come out of a session – to go out into the world, your paradigms shifted. Sessions usually take between 45 and 90 minutes.
- A session will involve a lot of writing things down, making your thinking concrete (a major difference from therapy).
- There are no set qualifications for a life coach. Look for rapport. Many do free trial sessions. A coach's own life experience relative to your own situation is a very important consideration, too – far more so than their qualifications.
- Personal coaches charge £50–£150 a session.
- On average, 12 sessions should suffice.
- The best way to find a life coach is by word of mouth. Or go to www.findalifecoach.co.uk.

health, my loved ones, and definitely my writing.

I wasn't alone with my emotional fragility, though. Two others had arrived with personal issues, even though Rosie Walford, the company's originator and lead coach, made it clear that the Big Stretch doesn't offer marriage guidance.

'It's primarily for people planning paths of action beyond their primary relationships,' she explained. 'The lateral thinking and group dynamics do seem particularly to stimulate people who want to break out of ruts, live by their values or create more fulfilment in their careers.'

Big Stretch successes include the creative director of a design agency who wanted to leave his business, but who found out through coaching that the real problem lay in his relationship with his business partner. Another graduate had overcome a chronic lack of self-confidence to expand her wedding-list business threefold in the twelve months following the course.

Our own group worked very well together: four men and four women, aged from 28 to 58, with diverse agendas. They included a lawyer who wanted to 'retire well' (he went away having decided to explore a number of avenues, including setting up an educational scholarship

as his legacy to his profession); a widow who wanted to reinvent herself; and a graphic designer who'd flown over from New York to learn to create her own 'pace and space' in life.

We soon settled into our new routine, in a beautiful alpine hotel, La Montana Magica. The mornings' coaching workshops posed big questions, and I think we all touched on long-repressed feelings at some point during the week. Yet it was hard to feel depressed when the view was of rolling valleys, huge skies and snow-capped peaks.

The workshops were led by Rosie, an experienced strategic planner for some of the biggest advertising agencies, trained in creative problem-solving, with an MA in experimental psychology from Oxford; and Bernie Evans, a creativity trainer and coach who teaches and leads creativity projects in business.

On the first two mornings, Rosie and Bernie led us as a group through a series of mental exercises, to help us tune in to our values, our intuition and creativity, and then to articulate our ambitions. I sobbed at one of those exercises: imagining what my loved one would say about me at my 70th birthday party. Because I wasn't

even sure who my loved one would be, I found it unbearably difficult.

Another potent exercise was to look at images torn out of magazines and to pick up any that particularly appealed to us. We had to talk about why we'd chosen the ones we had; and one of mine, a picture of a laughing family of four sitting on a beach, made me feel sad. When I tried to explain why, I became completely choked.

The premise of the Big Stretch is that nature helps us gain flashes of insight, and 'big ideas happen during big walks'. On day one, we trekked 2,000 metres to the top of Mount Hibeo, from where there were stunning views of both coast and distant snowy mountains; the next day took us down the famous Cares Gorge.

While we were hiking, Rosie had me list the cost of my yo-yoing behaviour; the pay-offs of dithering and indecision; and then what I was going to do about it. That's what I like about life-coaching. You start from where you're at, and move forward. It's like walking: directional, practical, motivational. You put one foot in front of the other while still admiring the scenery.

By the third day, we had each managed to identify the issue we most wanted to attack creatively for the rest of the week. For me, it transpired that the decision I thought I was there to make had actually been made a long time ago. My issue lay in accepting it and moving forward, rather than trying to change the past.

In a very powerful individual session, Rosie helped me identify the spiral of guilt and blame in which I'd become stuck: whenever I felt the pain of the loss of my marriage, I ran away from it, or turned it on myself, or tried clumsily to 'fix' it, thus causing more problems. Feelings of tenderness towards my husband, or good memories, immediately sent me into the loop.

By doing a guided visualisation, Rosie enabled me to feel that pain instead of avoiding it. It was the first time I'd come close to feeling that although I couldn't change what had happened, we could all move forward in a positive way. That session was held outside on the grass, gazing at misty mountains, sun on our faces and cowbells the only sound – it certainly beat a windowless therapist's office. It did more for me than eight months of counselling had managed. I christened the feeling 'pure grief', as opposed to the messy morass of emotions I'd previously been bogged down in.

By the end of the week, I felt so much better. Our group bonded fast; we shared jokes and joys and sorrows as we kayaked, picnicked and had ideas together. We had fantastic meals and plentiful wine. I had a six-month strategy planned, to motivate my work and relationships. Best of all, when I thought of that 70th birthday party, it no longer made me cry. My husband could still be there, giving a speech, whatever our separate circumstances. At last I felt equipped to forge a new sort of relationship with him. I felt released. □

The Big Stretch (01273 676712; www.thebigstretch.com) costs £1,680 a person, including seven nights' accommodation and all coaching, guiding, transfers, excursions and meals. Flights, tips and drinks are not included. *Lifesaver* by Louise Voss is published by Black Swan, priced £6.99.

Six steps to making a big decision

- 1 Get in touch with your values. What are you like when you're at your best? What kind of person do you want to be?
- 2 Assess all the facts: what specifically you want to see happen, what's interpretation and what's the truth. Analyse your feelings and become clear on what they are.
- 3 See if the big question breaks down into separate sub-issues, each of which might benefit from a fresh solution. Phrase each issue as a question, starting 'how to...' or 'in what ways might I...'
- 4 Mentally follow both decision paths, and compare results. For each, keep asking 'and why is that important to me?' to see which leads you closer to your own values. Don't canvass opinions from others.
- 5 Stop. Step back; go for a walk somewhere beautiful; wait. Try out each decision internally and see how it feels. Put a time frame on this: decide to look at it again in a few hours or days.
- 6 Act – and 'own' the outcome of your decision. Accept that it was your choice, made freely and with due consideration.