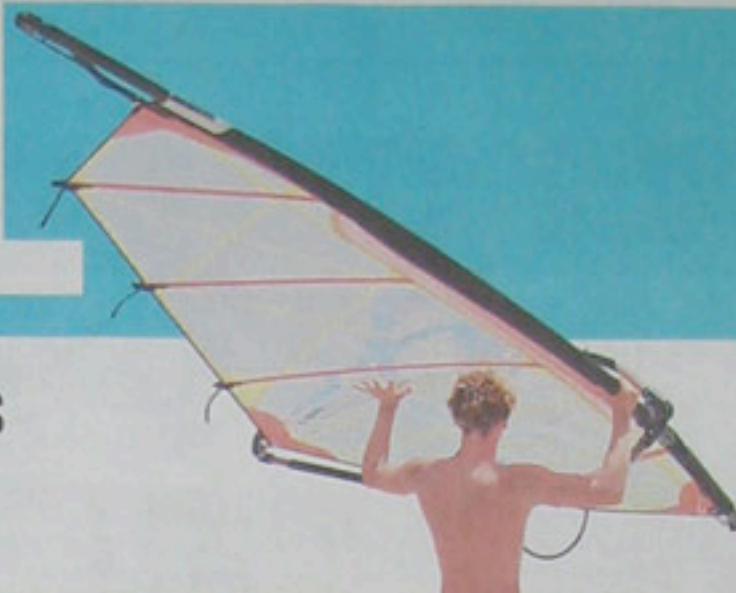




Open for business

Thailand recovers from the tsunami — but where are the tourists? Page 5



The 'It coast'

Croatia basks in the limelight as the New Riviera Pages 7-9

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WHAT I DID ON MY HOLIDAYS

I got a whole new life

How will you feel when you get home from your next holiday? Hopefully, you'll be refreshed, invigorated and raring to hit the office again. But a week later? A month? Most of us find that after only a few days back in the old routine, the holiday glow has dimmed, and it's time to start daydreaming on the travel websites all over again.

But how about a holiday that changes your life for ever? Fancy taking a trip that inspires you to confront your demons, control your lifestyle, quit your day job, dump your husband, take more risks, eat more celery, write that novel, buy that canal boat, live that dream? In short, do you want to come home a better person?

Because there's a growing number of holiday companies promising just that.

If you have the inclination — and the money — you can seek inspiration at a silent retreat in a Buddhist monastery, have every aspect of your lifestyle scrubbed clean by a team of health gurus, baffle in sacred mud or have warm oil dripped onto your third eye. You can even go on holiday with your inner angels.

But are these trips really for life, or just for the Easter break? We sent four writers to test some of the best-known life-changing holidays and try to sort the shams from the shamans. So, did they see the light, or was it all smoke and mirrors?

The rambling life coach

What's the programme? The Big Stretch is a week-long holiday that combines hill-walking with intense life-coaching sessions. This "creative life planning" is aimed specifically at people with big decisions or dilemmas they want to work through. It takes place in the Picos de Europa, in northern Spain, one of Europe's most unspoilt and beautiful mountain regions.

Who's the guru? Rosie Walford, The Big Stretch's founder, is a psychologist and "creative problem-solver" who has been employed by the BBC, The Body Shop and Safeway. She takes a second life coach on all trips, and up to eight clients join them, typically professionals aged 30-45.

The experience: I'd been working in the same organisation for 20 years and had arrived at a crossroads in my life, fed up with living in London and with a dream of relocating to Spain. I wanted to cut and run, but if I did, I'd miss out on some lucrative stock options in three years' time. I needed help thinking through my future.

The week was full-on. We'd get up at 8am, eat breakfast, then have a two-hour creative session in which Walford would fire ideas and questions at us. Then we'd

Next holiday, you could come home with an all-over tan, the hotel shampoo — and a brand-new life. That's the promise from the new travel experiences that offer a makeover for mind, body and spirit. But do they really work?

head off on a long walk, stopping on the mountain or by a river for a simple picnic of bread, ham and cheese, and get back at about 6pm. There was just time for a bath, then dinner at a local restaurant and another talk. The idea was that, while we were walking, we would mull over all the ideas we'd discussed and things would become clear in our minds. And it worked.

The first day's walk was quite gentle, and we chatted among ourselves and with the life coaches, but on the second day we had a real physical challenge: climbing to the peak of a mountain that was covered with 3ft of snow.

This pushed me to the limit of what I thought I could do. Reaching the top was an amazing feeling. Walford had talked that morning about what we wanted out of life, and asked each of us how we'd like

to change the world, and the walk seemed to echo the things she'd said. We were so busy climbing that we weren't consciously thinking about our own issues, but at the end of the day, I found that ideas were flooding out.

On day three, we spent four hours in kayaks. I fell into the river and went into panic mode — paddling forwards when I was being told to go backwards. That episode was instructive; it made me think about how I deal with obstacles in my life. And, apart from falling in, the day was great fun. I can't remember the last time I laughed so much.

By the third or fourth day, the group was opening up and we were telling each other why we'd come on the trip. We brainstormed each other's issues, coming up with amazing ideas. At the end of the

week, we took a long walk down from the mountains and ended up on a beach, where we stretched out on the sand. It felt like an ending, like we'd emerged from something very special.

One month on: I took a sabbatical from work and went travelling in Borneo, Vietnam and Thailand, which was amazing. Now I'm back in London and I'm putting all my plans into action. I'm taking control of my life and things seem very clear to me now. I feel great.

How to do it: The Big Stretch (01273 676712, www.thebigstretch.com) charges about £2,000pp, which includes coaching, transfers, excursions, a single ensuite room and all meals. The next trip will be in May. EasyJet (www.easyjet.com, 0905 821 0905: 65p/min) flies from Gatwick or Stansted to Bilbao, from £41.

Marina Royle

The lifestyle makeover

What's the programme? Inspa's name is misleading. This is not a spa, but a health and fitness makeover for stressed-out urbanites. Up to 16 clients are whisked off for a week and given a gourmet detox

diet, personal training, massage treatments, yoga lessons, herbal remedies and stacks of advice on lifestyle, diet and posture.

My retreat was in an 11th-century palazzo in the hills outside Siena. Other locations include Andalusia and Marrakesh.

Who's the guru? The resident team consisted of Max Tomlinson, one of the UK's leading nutritionists, the yoga teacher Kyrin Hall, personal trainers Jon Orum and Jamie Baird, physiotherapist Dona'h Tait and chef Victor Espinosa, who has cooked at The Ivy and Le Caprice. They all met while working at KX, an exclusive gym in Chelsea where the regulars include Gwyneth Paltrow and Hugh Grant. The clients are typically single, successful and aged 30-45. Most are women, though the week would equally suit men.

The experience: on paper, it looked like a sybaritic week in the sun with a bit of exercise and a healthy glow at the end. In reality, it was tough. Many of my favourite things were outlawed — coffee, tea, wine, beer, bacon sandwiches. And, while I adjusted to a vegan diet that was delicious but hardly filling, I struggled to cope with 90 minutes of yoga before breakfast, followed by three-hour hikes into the Tuscan countryside. After just 48

Continued on page 2

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