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Travel

JOURNEYS; No Talking. No Fun. It's Called A Vacation

By KAREN ROBINOVITZ
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Correction Appended

RIGHT after the new year, Tracey Ross, owner of the Los Angeles boutique that bears her name, turned in her Manolo Blahniks for Nike hiking sneakers and headed out to the mountains of Calabasas, Calif., to check into the Ashram, a boot camp-like spa where the motto is "To become, we overcome."

For seven days, Ms. Ross, 42, had to wake at 5:45 a.m. to do yoga before breakfast (a k a one scrambled egg, three slices of apple and herbal tea), hike for hours up a trail that previous guests like Oprah Winfrey had named Heartbreak Hill, ("It's straight up and so unforgiving," Ms. Ross said), grab lunch (six pieces of vegetable sushi with brown rice or a salad consisting of one apple and tofu yogurt dressing, along with three almonds), and then endure five more hours of intense physical activity -- ranging from aqua aerobics to weight training -- before having a bowl of lentil soup for dinner and crawling into bed to pass out. She endured blisters, an array of aches and pains, chapped lips and no-frill accommodations that were nothing like her experiences at the top-tier hotels she normally frequents. For this she paid \$3,500. And she called it a vacation.

"I needed a timeout from my busy life," she said. "I can't get that in St. Barts, where I wind up shopping and going out every night. I needed to get back to the basics and nature. I needed sweating and a sense of accomplishment, not to mention a week without makeup and getting dressed up."

Ms. Ross is hardly alone. Many travelers these days seem to be swapping Frette sheets and 24-hour room service for shared dorm rooms and 1,000-calorie-a-day diets. They are heading to places like the Tree of Life Rejuvenation Center, an ayurvedic medicine-yoga-meditation-fasting oasis in Patagonia, Ariz., (\$1,420 for a seven-day stay). They are signing up with Vladi, a German company that offers stays on the remote island off Chile where Alexander Selkirk, the inspiration for "Robinson Crusoe," was marooned; the package features a chance to camp in the cave where Selkirk survived for nearly five years (\$140 a day, plus \$250 for a cave survival kit). They are going on retreats to the Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, Calif., where talking is forbidden and sitting is an all-day activity (\$400 and up a week). They're meditating, handling kitchen duties, and sleeping in tents at the Shambhala Mountain Center, a spiritual retreat in the Colorado Rockies (\$200 for a weekend to \$1,805 for a month). And they are trying to book a room at the Ashram, where there is a six-month waiting list for people who want nothing more than to deprive themselves of all the comforts of modern life.

"There is an enormous trend of people who have the need to get out and do something different. They're looking for any kind of escape, and if that means, 'beat me up a little bit,' so be it," said Gary Mansour of Mansour Travel in Beverly Hills. "The point is to work your system to the point where you feel purified."

After a taxing 2003, not to mention a gluttonous holiday season, Sally Narkis, 35, of Hoboken, N.J., will be vacationing later this month at We Care, a holistic health center in Desert Hot Springs, Calif., where fasting and daily colonics are the agenda. She has never done anything like this before but feels that starving the body is the best way to feed the soul. "I get funny looks when I tell people I'm off to starve in the desert," she said. "First of all, why starve yourself? And why pay for it? But spiritually, I think this will give me the clarity and path to inner awareness that I'm looking for -- and won't find in Cabo San Lucas."

That may be why even many of the country's best-known spas, like the Canyon Ranch chain, Miraval near Tucson and the Greenhouse Spa in Arlington, Tex., have added strenuous activities in recent years, including Navy Seals-type training, sweat lodges and Army-style ropes courses to meet the demands of their challenge-seeking guests. Of course, such exhausting activities typically last only an hour or two, after which guests return to the extreme pampering of the traditional spa vacation. (Ultramoisturizing body wrap, anyone?)

"We've added more demanding options in the last three years," said Amy McDonald, director of the spa and program development at Miraval, "partially because more men were coming to the spa, and they wanted to climb walls, walk across wires, jump off a telephone pole and do physically intensive things. And when the women saw the men push themselves, they wanted it, too. We call it embracing your inner Everest. Being brought to the physical edge brings out a lot of emotion. And the more of these things we add, the more people sign up for them."

"Being deprived of basic luxuries makes me appreciate the little things and let go of stress, commotion and the things I think of as important, like the need to go to a nice restaurant or spend \$500 on a bag," said Pam Flakowitz, 33, the marketing director for American Express in New York. In December 2002, she stayed a week in the cramped quarters of Body & Soul Adventures on Brazil's Ilha Grande, where each day she kayaked on waters framed by jungles and rain forests, all on a daily diet of 1,200 calories. She had no modern conveniences, no telephone or computer access, no contact with the outside world.

"I cried the first three days, thinking, 'What did I do to myself?' All I wanted was a glass of wine and a poolside massage, but in the end, I realized it was so much better than a spa," Ms. Flakowitz said. In fact, she returned in July and has booked another trip in the spring.

Body & Soul charges \$2,850 for a week on the island.

"PHYSICALLY, it's hard, but mentally, it's harder," said Nicole Slaven, 32, a recipe developer at Martha Stewart Living. She went to the Boulder Outdoor Survival School two years ago just to see if she could last a week with nothing more than a poncho, a blanket, a knife and a small packet of food. On the first night, hoping to find a dry patch a land to sleep on, she had to settle for a plastic garbage bag. For the rest of the week, she did without showers, toilets and electricity.

"I could go to Mexico and sit on a beach any time, but I wanted to unwind in a different way," she said. "After a week in Grand Staircase-Escalante in Utah, where no one could care less about what you wear or what kind of shoes you have, I came home with a keener sense of self and a sharper mind. It was empowering to have a new set of skills, even if I can't make use of them on the Upper East Side of Manhattan."

Josh Bernstein, president of Boulder Outdoor in Colorado, said he believed that "since 9/11, people have re-evaluated what's important, and that applies to their vacation time."

"Ten years ago, it was a fringe group of outdoor adventurers," he added. "Today, mainstream people who have lavish lifestyles are coming to find a way to get to know themselves more deeply."

They also want a challenge. "There's a new need people have to prove themselves," said Jane Buckingham, president of Youth Intelligence, a trend-forecasting firm. "Can I fast for three days? Can I be quiet for a long time?"

Although Gabby Tana, a film producer who lives in Manhattan, has been to some of the most elegant spas in the world, including the Golden Door in California and Quiberon in Brittany, she said that none had been as healing as her stay at the Lucky Dog Lodge in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The \$1,200, weeklong yoga retreat involves sharing a bathroom with other guests, cleaning and cooking duties, silence during meals and five hours of yoga a day.

"The fact that you don't feel like you're being indulgent is the greatest indulgence," said Ms. Tana, 40, who first embarked on this minimalist journey five years ago. "It's so restorative, especially from the film industry, where it's all about being in Maui over Christmas and vacations where you have wait in lines to get a chaise in a prime location. Plus, there's no 'I'll have that extra helping of dessert because I'm on vacation' feeling. It's all about being healthy. You come home feeling like a good person, not a bad person."

Ms. Tana felt so strongly about her escape that three years ago, she dragged along her friend Andrea Blanch, a fashion photographer for Vogue, Rolling Stone and Revlon. "She is all about luxury," said Ms. Tana. "I had to practically pack her bags for her as she kicked and screamed. She's been back three times since."

Ms. Tana added: "I will always like four-star luxe living. It was challenging for me to rough it and not speak for periods of time, but the results made up for it. I left with such an amazing feeling that, although I complained about little things, like hearing other people go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, "I returned refreshed."

"It was freeing," she continued. "So what if it meant having to make my own bed?"

Although Ms. Tana, said she was happy to return to her old life, where she is free to talk -- "loudly" -- whenever she feels like it, others say they have come back transformed by the process.

Dave Platter, 32, once a partner at Quinn & Company, a public relations firm, was hardly the spiritual, New-Age type when he decided to spend a week in silence at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Mass., last January. "I was so busy. I never stopped. My whole life was talk, talk, talk. I was always entertaining others, managing a staff, and I needed some time to myself. A friend suggested this, and I figured, why not experiment," said Mr. Platter, whose previous meditation experience was, "five minutes here and there."

Although his friends thought he was losing his mind and joining a cult, Mr. Platter, never a fan of New Year's Eve parties, went to Insight to embrace 2003. "I was oblivious to what I was getting myself into. It seemed weird at first. People were really serious about it. The vibe was morose. For days, I fantasized about breaking out and talking to someone or going for a beer," he said.

Then, he said, by Day 4 an incredible thing happened. "I kind of enjoyed it. I stopped being worried about what everyone else was thinking and doing, and I zoned in on myself. It was suddenly a relief to not have to try to be anything for someone else."

The experience was an awakening one. When he came home, he sold his share of his business, sold his apartment, got back together with his ex-girlfriend (to whom he proposed) and decided to do something more meaningful.

"You fill your life up with so much stuff you don't need -- attitudes about work, relationships," said Mr. Platter, who now does public relations work for the Shambhala Mountain Center. "My retreat gave me time to reflect and see what's really important and what's driving me. It sounds hokey, but I saw things about myself I never knew."

GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

In the Name of Fitness, Denial and Self-Discovery

A GROWING number of spas and retreat centers around the country are offering visitors the chance to deny themselves everything from coffee to small talk in the name of self-discovery and health. Here, a sampling of some of the programs:

Boulder Outdoor Survival School

Boulder, Utah

www.boss-inc.com; (303) 444-9779.

Like the reality show "Survivor" but in real life, the Boulder Outdoor Survival School -- BOSS for short -- specializes in teaching wilderness survival and ancient living skills like starting a fire from rubbing sticks, building a shelter out of leaves and living without showers or electricity. The school says it can "change your life forever" in as little as four days. From \$495 for a four-day introductory field course to \$2,995 for a 28-day field course.

Trip Equinox

New York

www.equinoxfitness.com; (212) 774-6318.

This fitness club lets you take your workout on the road, with vacations spent trekking up Inca trails to Machu Picchu or cycling through Tuscany. While all trips include sports activities, they are not luxury-free (on the Tuscan trip, participants stop for antipasti and glasses of vino). "You can have it as easy or as rough as you want," said Rhonda Smith, Equinox's travel director. Under \$1,000 for a three-day trip to a spa to \$5,000 for 10- to 14-day international trips (food and lodging included).

We Care Holistic Health Center

Desert Hot Springs, Calif.

www.wecarespa.com; (800) 888-2523.

Visitors come to this holistic spa in the desert to clean the toxins out of their systems by giving up solid food for three days to a week, living on hourly drinks of Kyogreen, Spirulina, wheat grass and such. There are also daily colonics in luxe surroundings and access to classes on topics like nutrition and yoga. The cost for three days and two nights ranges from \$725 for a dorm room with shared bathroom to \$1,108 for a suite with private bath. Weekly programs range from \$2,205 to \$3,403 for deluxe rooms.

The Ashram

Calabasas, Calif.

www.theashram.com; (818) 222-6900.

This boot-camp retreat takes 12 people at a time for one-week sessions heavy on hiking and yoga and light on eating (breakfast is fruit juice or an orange and herbal tea). No outside distractions like cellphones and no caffeine. Rooms are spartan, and all guests share baths. There's a six-month waiting list to get in; \$3,500 a week, all inclusive.

Tree of Life Rejuvenation Center

Patagonia, Ariz.

www.treeoflife.nu; (520) 394-2520

In the mountains south of Tucson, Tree of Life bills itself as "an innovative, cross-cultural, ecological, vegan live-food, educational, spiritual retreat center and holistic medical 'spa' committed to the healing and awakening of consciousness." Visitors can detoxify on various fasting regimens and by using an "ozone steambox" and "infrared sauna." No television or telephones. From \$1,420 for seven days to \$4,860 for 21 days.

Spirit Rock Meditation Center

Woodacre, Calif.

www.spiritrock.org; (415) 488-0164, ext. 234.

This Northern California retreat offers a chance to spend the bulk of your vacation in silent meditation. The first session usually starts about 5:30 a.m. Rooms are sparsely furnished, and most baths are shared. And you can't escape into a good book -- they're not allowed. A three-day, two-night program begins at \$67 a night; six weeks or more, \$55 a night. Fees are based on a sliding scale; scholarships are available.

Rasa Yoga

Lucky Dog Lodge, Sugar Hill, N.H.

www.rasayoga.com; (212) 875-0475

Based in New York, Rasa Yoga offers yoga and ayurveda retreats at a New Hampshire farmhouse. Three-daily yoga classes and low-fat, sugar-free, dairy-free ayurvedic meals (there's no talking during them). The Rasayana program "reawakens and rejuvenates our essential juiciness," the studio says. Meals, classes and accommodations: \$1,450 for seven nights.

Correction: January 23, 2004, Friday Because of an editing error, an article last Friday about vacations that incorporate a measure of self-denial misattributed a quotation about the Lucky Dog Lodge in New Hampshire. It was Andrea Blanch, not her traveling companion,

Gabby Tana, who said: "I will always like four-star luxe living. It was challenging for me to rough it and not speak for periods of time, but the results made up for it. I left with such an amazing feeling that, although I complained about little things, like hearing other people go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, I returned refreshed. It was freeing. So what if it meant having to make my own bed?"

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