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The Juice Retreat

Vacationers, No Longer Satisfied With Sightseeing, Sign Up For Educational, Self-Improvement Programs

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My mind needed it. My body craved it. The dark rings under my eyes begged for it.

It was time to get away.

But the way I see it, vacation days are precious things meant to be used wisely. I didn't want to just sleep them away under the sun at a beach resort. I didn't want to spend them in the back of a tour bus or with a camera slung around my neck.

I needed to rest and recharge, but I wanted to return from vacation with something more lasting, something more profound than a short-lived tan and some clunky souvenirs.

What to do?

My Internet search for the answer brought me to American Yogini, a boutique retreat center on the edge of the Hamptons on Long Island, specializing in yoga, raw juice fasting and workshops in nutrition and vegetarian cooking.

Having explored yoga and holistic health before, I felt pulled to a deeper study. I was eager to know more, and the timing seemed right: I had been feeling sluggish and cranky of late and wanted to take better care of myself, wanted to make smarter choices in diet and nutrition that would translate to a clearer mind and increased energy.

So with my belly full of a final, plentiful home-cooked meal, I set out for Remsenburg, N.Y., in the hopes of jump-starting a simpler, more purposeful lifestyle.

And to subsist on nothing but raw juices of fruits and vegetables for five days.

At her sprawling retreat, at once homey and lush, Mary McGuire-Wein has for the past two years given women a haven to unplug and reflect - and explore new terrain.

"People who come here are seeking connection and integration. And my intention is really to give them something - some knowledge - that they can take home with them, more than just some pictures," says McGuire-Wein, 47. A former dancer who has been teaching Pilates and yoga for more than 10 years, she launched American Yogini on her estate as a place to share what she has learned from her studies of holistic health and wellness.

Her program offerings are eclectic, but all include the common thread of yoga and purposeful living: lessons in knitting, vegetarian and raw-foods preparation, surfing, feng shui and painting - the last of which she took to Tuscany, Italy, and Giverny, France.

"You don't just go on a vacation like this and go home and everything was as it was," she says. "There's a shift. It's a gift almost; the learning is almost the gift that you take home that you'll have forever."

From quaint retreat settings like American Yogini to lavish European holidays, the concept of such learning-based getaways is gaining popularity, travel industry experts say.

More than ever, the vacation-bound are seeking travel experiences that take them deeper, teach them more than their sightseeing holidays of old. They're using their vacations as educational excursions to study history and art, to take up a new hobby or brush up on an old one, to learn about health and wellness - and, in the process, about themselves.

"Learning has become more of a lifelong process in general," says Melissa Famiglietti Snape, a vice president of Collette Vacations, one of the largest tour operators in North America. "Whether it's language classes, art classes, cooking classes - continuing education courses have gone through the roof all over the country."

And the travel industry has taken notice, she says. Over the past five years, tour companies, resorts and retreat centers are amping up their offerings, meshing education traditionally relegated to the classroom with lush getaway settings.

Take a three-week course in nature conservation and bush survival at the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre in South Africa. Learn how to play an instrument in a camp-style setting at the Fur Peace Ranch in Ohio's Hocking Hills region. Study watercolor painting and collage through Artist Adventures' southern Italy retreats.

"Places are developing programs that are purely learning vacations - like yoga retreats or cooking classes - where people go to solely develop certain skills," Famiglietti Snape says. "They're going on vacation almost as much to focus on the development of a skill as they are to experience the [destination]."

It's a change from passively drinking in the culture to actively participating in it, she says. Because when it comes to vacation, adventure seekers like Kat Carney view their travels this way:

"When I come back, I want to come back better," says Carney, 37, a health journalist and former CNN reporter who splits her time between Los Angeles and North Carolina. "I want to come back knowing something different. I can go to a regular spa at home and get a massage. I want to come back [from vacation] with stories."

Which is why she's using her vacation this month to study Muay Thai kickboxing in Koh Samui, Thailand. Over the next three weeks, she'll train for four hours almost daily - enhancing her skill in the Americanized activity she does at her local gym, but learning its authentic form in its land of origin.

"I wanted to go someplace different," says Carney, whose classes will be held not far from the Spa Sanui resort she's staying at - a rustic retreat which itself offers a host of classes in meditation, cooking and massage.

"I wanted to go and have a good time doing something I wouldn't get a chance to do at home."

At a raw juice retreat at American Yogini, every morning begins with a cup of vegetable broth, an optional spoonful of a whole grain quinoa and a 90-minute yoga class in a sun-drenched room overlooking Moriches Bay. Costs vary depending on the program, but a five-day juice fast is priced at \$655 for a double-occupancy room and \$1,200 for a private room. Each day, three other guests and I take in a late morning fruit juice and a late afternoon vegetable juice - both raw and freshly pressed. The evening brings another mug of broth. In between, it's all water, all tea, all the time.

In the free flow of the days ahead, McGuire-Wein offers impromptu lessons in juicing and eating whole foods - that is, fresh fruits, vegetables and grains that haven't been processed or tainted with unpronounceable chemicals and preservatives.

And all through the experience, we commiserate on the emotional and energetic ups and downs of the fast. Unlike other programs at the center, the days are loose and personally tailored. Guests can stroll the property, drive into town, indulge in a steam bath or retreat to their tidy, comfortable rooms before regrouping if an afternoon workshop is scheduled.

When my energy is up, I spend my time exploring the towns and beaches of the Hamptons. When it's down, I nap in various nooks of the airy white estate or pore over books from McGuire-Wein's vast collection. I journal in the sun room, meditate in the yoga room and sip ginger tea in the cozy wooden den when we gather each evening to watch a movie - the only time the television is turned on.

Massage and acupuncture appointments dot the day's schedule and, for the less squeamish, McGuire-Wein will shuttle guests to a colon hydrotherapist. I opt to keep it simple, and forgo any extras.

The center holds up to 10 guests, fitting for the intimate, casual feel McGuire-Wein aspires to. There's no dress code, no need to get dolled up. It's an easy setting for women to take off their makeup and let down their hair - a home away from home.

McGuire-Wein embarked on her first juice fast more than 10 years ago at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Mass., an experience she calls powerful. "It changed me; it changed everything I did, the choices I made."

She wanted to share her knowledge with other women.

"I wanted to make it not freaky. I wanted it to be really safe and not scary," says McGuire-Wein, who also teaches at Kripalu. Her guests run the gamut - from experienced yoginis and juice fasters to novices.

The success of her yoga and fasting programs, scattered on the calendar throughout the year, led her to expand into more structured programs: raw-foods cooking workshop with New York chef Chad Sarno, surfing lessons with Hawaiian native Mirabai James and an art and yoga retreat - open to both men and women - this spring in the French countryside of Giverny with painter Charles Wildbank.

"We had people that were not that experienced, but were curious to try something new as an adventure in self-exploration," McGuire-Wein says.

"It's about being very present here, about learning something new and going back home bigger than when you arrived," she says. "They want to be expanded in some way." In my own case, I went back with a quieter mind. Slowing my body down with a fast helped me see where I needed to slow down - and pare down - in areas of my life.

I was committed to making yoga a more regular part of my routine. I had a sudden urge to purge my closets and desk drawers of all the clutter that had accumulated in the last year. And I had this unprecedented excitement about cooking new foods, trying new recipes and ingredients - and just taking better care of myself.

It was as though I had returned home with suitcase of guiding principles that I could go back to whenever life got hectic or threw me a curveball. When I felt drained and ragged, I knew how to give myself my own mini-retreat.

And that, to me, is more valuable than the shiniest knick-knack in any souvenir shop.

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