

## **Journeys of the Self: The Need to Retreat**

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### **Introduction**

Ten years ago, in 2006, the authors of this chapter wrote a paper about holistic tourism and edited a special edition of a tourism journal (Smith and Kelly, 2006) to collate research on an emerging sector now well known as 'wellness tourism'. At the time, the authors chose to focus on the term 'holistic tourism' to reflect a preference for exploring tourism spaces that tried to engage with the wholeness and the balance of body, mind and spirit. A distinction was made between those forms of tourism that take place in thermal or healing waters (e.g. hot springs and spas) and those that usually take place in (holistic) retreats and are generally not water-based. The former (i.e. wellness tourism using water) tends to be based more on curative treatments for the body, whereas the latter (i.e. retreat tourism) tends to be based more on preventative therapies for the mind and spirit. Self-development is also a major focus of this form of tourism. Subsequent publications (e.g. Smith and Puczkó, 2009, 2013; Erfurt-Cooper and Cooper, 2009; Bushell and Sheldon, 2009; Kelly, 2012; Voigt and Pforr, 2013) have made this distinction much clearer. For example, Voigt, Brown and Howat s (2011) wellness tourism research makes the distinction between beauty spas, lifestyle resorts and spiritual retreats, but there have still been relatively few publications that have focused exclusively on retreat-based tourism (with the exception of Lea, 2008; Heintzmann, 2013; Fu, Tanyatanaboon and Lehto, 2015). Along with Dina Glouberman and Josée Cloutier's contribution to this Handbook, this chapter provides a re-visitation of retreat-based tourism. However, as a complement to Glouberman and Cloutier's chapter which focuses on the importance of communities for holistic wellbeing, this chapter explores the idea of how individual selves negotiate their everyday lives in conjunction with the idea of retreating for various purposes at different stages in their lives.

Women, in particular are focused on as key participants in this form of tourism, especially middle aged women. Research has shown that the majority of spa and wellness consumers and tourists are women e.g. ISPA (2011) showed that around 78% of visitors are women in USA spas, and with an average age of 45 (Smith and Puczkó, 2009, 2013). Kelly's (2012) research, based on several retreats, showed that 88% of retreat visitors were female. The age range varied, but a relatively high number tends to be between 35 and 55. As suggested by Gray (2002) women are more open to discussing their feelings and emotions in a public forum, according to popular psychological research. The Retreat Company (2013) represents at least 500 retreat centres in the UK and Europe and reported that their most popular requests are for yoga holidays. Gerritsma (2008) analysed yoga in the Netherlands and showed that on average yoga practitioners are about 80% women and 20% men. This confirmed Lehto et al.'s (2006) study and is also confirmed by Smith and Sziva in this Handbook. Women's identities, family responsibilities and physical bodies are scrutinised by others and by themselves on an ongoing basis according to objectification theory (Mask, Blanchard and Baker, 2014). Fullagar and O'Brien (2014) suggest that women aged 35-44 in Australia make the most use of online access to psychologists and psychotherapists. A recent study showed that although women are generally happier and more satisfied than men, they

also report higher levels of anxiety (ONS, 2016). Engagement with holistic retreats for spiritual or psychological respite/reflection allow women space, time and support to cope with their everyday lives, their self-perceptions and anxiety levels. A case study of a women's retreat is presented in the latter part of the chapter to illustrate how this works in practice.

### **The Growing Need to Retreat**

One question that needs to be considered in the context of wellness or wellbeing is whether (and if so, why?) it is actually necessary to retreat from everyday life in order to enhance a sense of self. Optimum wellbeing should ideally be possible in the context of everyday life - in leisure rather than tourism - but there are several reasons why retreating may sometimes be desirable. Contemporary capitalist societies encourage a culture of instant gratification. Unfortunately, the result of instant gratification, over-consumption and increasing speed has not been a very happy one with growing rates of obesity in most Western countries, high levels of depression and suicide, even in some of the supposed 'happiest' countries, and a lingering sense that 'there must be more to life than this'. One principle that has been proved time and again is the fact that money does not buy happiness, at least, after a certain point. The Easterlin paradox has been debated in wellbeing circles for three decades and consensus was reached that increased material gains do not necessarily equate to increased wellbeing or happiness, especially after a certain level of income has been attained (Easterlin, 1974; Knight and Rosa, 2011). The exact level has not been agreed, but the principle still holds. It is often assumed that reducing consumption would lead to a decrease in quality of life or wellbeing, but this need not be the case (it should be noted here that quality of life and wellbeing are often seen as synonymous terms and that happiness is often considered to be synonymous with subjective wellbeing, e.g. Theofilou, 2013)

The cult of speed has engulfed societies to such an extent that the intervention of a whole movement was needed to counter it, the so-called 'Slow Movement'. The author of *In Praise of Slow*, Carl Honoré (2004) encouraged this movement in response to his own horror that his life had become one big 'soundbite'. Another 'counter-movement' (at least, in holistic circles) could be considered to have taken place with the publication of Erkhart Tolle's (1999) *The Power of Now*, which was published even earlier. This involves being fully present in the moment (arguably an early reference to a form of mindfulness) and very much 'here'. Kabat-Zinn (1994:) defines mindfulness as "waking up and living in harmony with oneself and the world. It has to do with examining who we are, with questioning our view of the world and our place in it, and with cultivating some appreciation for the fullness of each moment we are alive. Most of all, it has to do with being in touch". Smalley and Winston (2010:xvi) state that "Mindfulness may be thought of as a state of consciousness, one characterized by attention to present experience with a stance of open curiosity. It is quality of attention that can be brought to any experience". Ericson, Kjonstad and Barstad (2014) argue that mindfulness has positive effects on both wellbeing and empathy and quote studies where mindfulness increased happiness and where happier people live more sustainably and with greater ecological awareness. Lewis-Smith et al. (2016) discuss how mindfulness has also

been successful in improving the body image and problems of disordered eating among middle-aged women.

Gretchen Rubin (2013) conducted an interesting experiment to enhance her sense of happiness at home by truly appreciating what was already around her, arguably, a form of mindfulness. The last words of the book were "Now is now. *Here* is my treasure" (Rubin, 2013: 253). Her experiment did not involve travel outside of her own city (New York), despite acknowledging that „people who travel to new places and try new things are happier than those who stick only to the familiar" (ibid.:219), but it did involve what might be described as 'staycation' experiences such as visiting new places within the city and appreciating them fully. This book raises the questions how far people may find what they are looking for within their home environment and how far it is necessary or desirable to travel. An interesting question to pose might be how much the everyday 'here' is lived or perhaps even tolerated, with the forward anticipation of being 'there', or away. Oullette et al (2005) explored the motivation of 'being away' as one facet of spiritual retreat tourism and found it to be significant in a deeper experience for the visitor. Corvo (2011) also observes that it is a fragile, unsatisfied self that often waits all year for a holiday and focuses on it with great expectations and hope. Narwijn (2010) and Corvo (2011) even suggest that individual trips can create greater pre-trip than post-trip happiness.

Being aware, being present and engaged with the self are important elements, arguably, of holistic retreat tourists. Often, new participants in mindfulness practices find that an appetite for self-reflection and review happens, and these needs can often be met through holistic or spiritual retreats. Tolle (2005:271) states that "your entire life journey ultimately consists of the step you are taking at this moment", so moving and being fully present in the moment are by no means incompatible. Mindfulness does not mean a literal standing still, but a state of being where awareness and presence are needed. During times of stillness and appreciation, the biggest changes may take place (e.g. during meditation, but also perhaps while travelling or being out of one's everyday environment and perspective). However, Tolle (2005) also suggests that many people feel more alive when they travel to foreign places or countries because this 'experiencing' or 'being' takes up more of their consciousness than thinking, they become more present. Somehow, they are still possessed by internal dialogue, or constant 'mental chattering': "they haven't really gone anywhere.. only their body is traveling, while they remain where they have always been: in their head" (ibid.:239). Therein lie some of the complexities of 'here versus there', being really present and variances within individual propensities for travel-prompted reflection or transformation. As suggested by Alain de Botton (2002) in the *Art of Travel*, one of the barriers to the enjoyment of travel is the fact that people cannot easily escape from themselves and their persistent worries. However, retreating may be one of the ways in which they can confront their worries in an alternative setting and learn how to deal with them better in everyday life when they return. A process of transformation may also begin to take place.

### **Wellness Tourism and Transformation**

Reisinger (2013, 2015) argues that tourism offers rich transformational experiences. She suggests that "Travel can offer physical, psychological, cognitive affective and spiritual

experiences that can change one's assumptions, expectations, world views and fundamental structures of the self. Travel can offer a journey to a new awareness, development and growth. This journey creates new meaning, offers fulfilment of unsatisfied needs and develops new authentic experiences" (Reisinger, 2015:5). Transformation is described as "an inner journey" and part of a broader process of social change. This includes self-actualization, being true to one's own nature and being authentic. However, she also argues that some types of tourism lead to transformation whereas others do not. For example, wellness tourism "embraces the self and enhances well-being of the individual, group and community" (Reisinger, 2013:223). Reisinger's earlier work (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006) had suggested that wellness tourism is partly based on getting in touch with what is inside and outside us and on 'letting be' when encountering and dealing with the world. Smith (2012) outlines the potentially transformative power of wellness tourism in terms of physical, emotional/psychological, existential, spiritual, social, cultural and environmental dimensions.

Little (2012) also notes that health and wellness tourism is 'transformational' -taking people from one state of mind or bodily appearance to another, generally a positive one they are more happy and content with. She notes that there is a "growing aspect of tourism emerging around exercise, healthy eating and bodily size and shape" (Little, 2012: 259). Fitness and weight loss holidays highlight modern ideas of the healthy body and the appropriate sizing of the body and the responsibilities for their own healthy bodies people are taking. Indeed, 'fitness retreats' often framed as 'bootcamps' use phrases such as "journey to the more impressive you" (No.1 Bootcamp, Ibiza, online 2015). Little (2015) also explores the role of nature as an actor participating in this process of the transformative self, as does Lea (2008) in her exploration of 'retreating to nature'. These spaces often form important aspects of retreat destination decision-making, and Oulette et al (2005) further note that 'beauty' is an important factor in repeat visitation to the retreat in their research. So it can be argued that the individual self – gender, life-cycle stage, parenting, responsibilities, career changes, illness or even more abstract existential crises, all play a role in this transformational-reflective process; whilst the external environment and nature are also important for supporting and nurturing this process.

### **Travel and the Self**

Travel can be posed as both a means of escaping from one's self and reality, or indeed as a means of finding it. Gazley and Watling (2015) disagree with the idea that tourists somehow 'find themselves' when travelling, but argue instead that self is created using symbolic products and experiences when abroad. The 'tourist self' is not considered to be a fixed entity. They define 'self' using the work of James (1950) and Blummer (1969) who divided the self into four: the material self, social self, spiritual self, and pure ego. Tolle (1999) suggests that it is the 'ego' that watches and judges the 'true' self. Subsequent studies concur that self is indeed multi-faceted e.g. Sirgy and Su (2000) who use four dimensions to explain and predict behaviour: actual self-image (how people actually see themselves); ideal self (how they would like to see themselves); social self (how they think others see them); and ideal social self (how they would like others to see them).Gazley and Watling's (2015) findings support previous literature that how one sees one's 'ideal-self'and 'social-self'will have an impact on consumption-buying decisions.

However, holistic or transformational literature might argue that there is a 'true' or 'authentic' self' (Reisinger, 2013). Smith (2012:62) describes how "Travel becomes truly transformative because it not only reveals a true or authentic self, but maybe a new and more adventurous self who may never had existed had the individual not travelled". Important here also is Ning Wang's conceptualisations of tourism and 'existential authenticity' (1999), which is in opposition to ideas of authenticity focused on objects or experiences – instead Wang considers the notion of tourist travel being driven by the search for 'the authentic self' or true self, which is relevant for many forms of wellness and holistic tourism.

Part of the true self may reside in the 'spiritual self', which is often explored in the context of retreats. Moal-Ulvoas and Taylor (2014:) note the importance of self in their definition of spirituality "Spirituality is [thus] concerned with understanding reality in a broad sense and includes understanding one's self, other human beings or alterity, and the sacred". Although spiritual development is seen as a lifelong process, it is well-documented that spirituality tends to grow in later life. Moal-Ulvoas and Taylor (2014) researched how spirituality can motivate older adults to travel and results in knowing the self better, giving global meaning to their lives, better understanding others, and connecting more closely with nature.

All of the above may cause us to question the different senses of self that an individual may experience at different ages and life stages and to consider how this may impact upon their behaviour and activities. The average age of wellness tourists (including those who go to spas, retreats or for medical tourism) is around 45 or middle age (Smith and Puczkó, 2013). It is no coincidence that this is the average age, as several studies suggest that middle-aged people have the lowest levels of happiness with the so-called 'U-bend' of life reaching its lowest point in the mid-40s or early 50s (The Economist, 2010; ONS, 2016). Robinson and Wright (2013:408) describe mid-life crises (usually occurring between 40 and 49) as the presence of strong negative emotions and major changes "not just a time of internal crisis but also a time of external transition [.....]it centres on major, tangible changes in life structure, as well as challenges and changes to identity and affect". Whatever happens, the journey continues and there is no choice but to continue with it. As stated by Shafak (2010:343) "Little by little, one turns forty, fifty, and sixty and, with each major decade, feels more complete. You need to keep walking, though there's no place to arrive at". Finding ways to do this while experiencing the maximum levels of happiness possible is one of life's biggest challenges.

Tolle (2005:115) suggests that it comes from the power of now, stating that "Being one with life is being one with NOW. You then realize that you don't live your life, but life lives you. Life is the dancer, and you are the dance". Most human beings need a helping hand at one time or another to achieve this, even temporarily. This may come from psychotherapy or counselling, from spiritual practices or from wellness activities. The following section provides a brief overview of how retreats may provide the space and activities to nurture and develop the self through its life journey. However, long-term benefits are only really possible with regular practice of what is learnt there, and that may be the critical difference between wellness tourism, everyday life and longterm benefits.

## Holistic Retreats and Tourism

Lea (2008) suggests that there is a long history of removing oneself from everyday life in order to rest and recuperate, however, escapism is only one part of the experience in retreat tourism (Smith, 2012). Connections with the self and nature are all part of the therapeutic process, but these may be negative and uncomfortable, however healing they become ultimately (Lea, 2008). Indeed, Reisinger (2013, 2015) emphasises the challenges of transformation in terms of feelings of insecurity, risk or even trauma. Retreats technically offer 'safe' spaces in which to develop the self, but self-development is not always a comfortable process, just as a pilgrimage is not an easy route to spirituality. Indeed, as suggested by Heintzmann (2013) some tourists visit retreat centres to deal with or overcome negative or life events, such as serious illnesses, relationship break ups or the death of a loved one. Even the names of many retreat centres reflect the emphasis on restoration/the self, including 'Restival', an eco-tent detox retreat in the Sahara desert in Morocco and 'Reclaim Your Self' a yoga holiday company offering luxury yurt based yoga holidays in Mongolia.

Retreats can be defined as places for quiet reflection and rejuvenation, an opportunity to regain good health and/or a time for spiritual reassessment and renewal, either alone or in a group (Retreats Online, 2007, cited in Kelly, 2010). Unpicking this definition it is apparent that the concept of 'retreat' may mean a physical place, or an opportunity or moment in time for rest, reflection or self improvement of some sort. An immense variety of retreat options exist, some driven by spiritual organisations, others by tourism-led motives and the term itself is borrowed often in different contexts making a comprehensive typology difficult. However, examining the current offering the table below suggests a typology of retreats from the provision/supply side.

**Table 1. A Typology of Retreats**

Category	Emphasis	Examples
Spiritual	Spiritually informed spaces and practices, e.g. ashrams. <i>Practices:</i> silent / other meditation, personal reflection	Buddhist retreat centres, ashrams, Eg. Rivendale, Gaia House UK
Religious	Spaces owned and/or run by religious communities <i>Practices:</i> prayer, reflection	Monasteries, convents and other religious settings offering residential retreats to visitors
Yoga Retreats	Specifically advertised as 'yoga retreats' <i>Practices:</i> yoga-dominated holidays offering different types of yoga (ashtanga, hatha etc)	Purpose built centres, or temporary settings hired overseas by yoga teachers to offer their everyday clients a yoga-based holiday.
Health Retreats	Permanent or temporary settings offering health improvement retreats. <i>Practices:</i> often based on certain nutritional activities such as juicing, fasting, healthy	'Explore Raw', UK company running retreats in Portugal, and many others with various combinations of nutrition/place offerings

	diet or aimed at certain ailments (e.g. asthma, obesity and so on)	
Fitness Retreats	Aimed at short-term motivation and supported programmes for kickstarting physical exercise. Practices: scheduled programmes of running, and indoor/outdoor classes and challenges, usually involves nutrition and dietary programme aimed at weightloss	'Bootcamps' for weekend or weeklong stays in the UK or overseas. Some focus on certain activities such as running. e.g. GI Jane camps, UK. Often celebrity endorsed. Wild Fitness, Zanzibar
Mind Based Retreats	Offering retreats emphasising rest, relaxation and reflection outside of spiritual/religious contexts. Practices: meditation, mindfulness, counselling	Permanent or temporary retreat spaces hired by practitioners abroad. e.g. 'Wilderness Minds' – mindfulness in nature, 'Corejourneys', everyday and outdoor/retreat wellbeing; both UK. Vipassana meditation centres, India.
Body-Mind-Spirit	Usually permanent retreat centres, established to offer an holistic provision of activities that help revive the physical, spiritual AND the psychological self (yoga, meditation, nutrition, exercise, groupwork)	Skyros Greece, Cortijo Romero Spain, Kamalaya Wellness Sanctuary Thailand
Miscellaneous	Place-defined retreats , e.g. eco-retreats in rainforests, deserts or other unusual locations, where the environment itself contributes strongly to the experience	e.g. Negev desert eco-retreat, Tailwind Jungle Lodge, Mexico, Wind Sand and Stars silent Retreat, Sinai desert Egypt.

It is possible to classify retreats in many ways – based on the place, the environment, the activities, the spiritual emphasis and so on. What is clear from the literature and the actual holidays on offer to visitors, is that the range, content and purpose is quite immense. Retreats Online (2016) for example, classify retreats by location, by date and by 'activity' – the latter uses categories such as 'personal/creative', 'spiritual', 'outdoor', 'yoga' and so on, led by market preferences perhaps. Specialist retreats offering nutritional advice are very current, as are fitness weightloss 'camps'. Many appeal to the solo traveller, and as such, the 'self' is therefore the critical element, whether for psychological or physical respite or improvement. Descriptors of going 'off grid' or to 'secluded boltholes' are common, emphasising displacement from the everyday stresses of modern life. Interpreting and applying the word 'retreat' in the context of wellness tourism must therefore be treated with caution, questioning what it means and how it is used is necessary before making

generalised comments. For this chapter, the main interest lies in spiritual, religious, mind-based and holistic body-mind-spirit retreats and their visitor experiences and motivations. The table above however, offers a wider contextualisation of the way in which the sector itself liberally uses the term 'retreat'.

Of the limited amount of academic research on retreats, much of the work centres on the visitors and their engagement with different activities and motivations.

Fu, Tanyatanaboon and Lehto (2015)'s study of online reviews of retreat guests revealed that many of them were driven to visit retreats because of physical, work or existential challenges. Four major themes of perceived changes were identified, including bodily change, emotional change, attitudinal change and skill change. Their cluster analysis of retreat activities identified three types of visitors, i.e., physical and psychological balance seeker, bodily therapeutic seeker, and spiritual enhancement seeker. Overall, they concluded that a transformative experience may be intentionally sought by guests but can only be facilitated through co-creative processes including carefully designed programmes and tailored activities coupled with conducive settings and service delivery. However, they emphasise that only a longitudinal study could test whether there is a long-term transformative effect after guests return home.

In other research on retreat visitors, Kelly (2012) noted that the rest/relaxation factor was the main motivator, with social and spiritual reasons coming in strongly but to a much lesser degree. Supporting this, a typology of visitors classified these retreat tourists into learners, exploratory dabblers, reinforcers and spiritualists. All have variable reasons for coming on retreats and with differential levels of experience in common retreat practices such as yoga, meditation, tai chi and so on. Notions of the reflective self and transformation were very evident in this research, where participants spoke about going away to feel better, and returning home as new and 'better versions' of themselves. Personal growth, enlightenment, new found understandings of practices, of themselves and of others were discussed by retreat participants reflecting other research noted above by Little (2012), Lea (2008) and Reisinger (2013)

### **Womens' Need to Retreat**

Kelly (2012) notes that the lens through which a person sees his/her own sense of self and life purpose in a home setting can be blurred by the everyday routines of work, childcare, commuting and other duties. This lens is clearer when a person takes themselves to a chosen retreat location with the purposeful decision to engage with a particular practice, guru, or even just to rest. Corvo (2011) suggests that holidays have strong symbolic values for individuals and can serve to recoup lost identities. For women there are changes in physical appearances with age and childbirth and objectification theory posits that women are generally socialised to adopt a 'body-as-object' perspective of their physical self. This is reinforced by the media which values women mainly for their visual and sexual appeal (Mask et al., 2014). Lewis-Smith et al. (2016) suggest that body dissatisfaction and disordered eating are prevalent among women in midlife and often have adverse and long-term impacts on both physical and psychological quality of life. Post-childbirth women engage in multi-tasking and 'juggling' as attempts are made by many to hold onto old identities, hard-won careers as well as take on new self-identities as mothers. Fullagar and O'Brien (2014) suggest

that many women find themselves in a feminised carer role which is constantly 'other-orientated'. They describe "the challenges women face in overcoming gendered constraints that impede their exploration of different relations to self and how leisure practices are an important domain of capabilities" (ibid.:120). They also suggest that rather than becoming the object of medical intervention when and if depressed, women could learn to understand themselves and engage in more affective transformations through self-care practices. There can be a silencing, a privatised isolation of women as they take on these new and different roles. Many find themselves constantly tired as they attempt to run families, homes, support partners and children, with very little physical or emotional time left for themselves. Robinson and Wright (2013) suggest that women's mid-life crises (if they happen) tend to centre more around problems with family and relationships, whereas men's include more work and career problems. A growing awareness of mortality and ageing often engendered by bereavement can also contribute to crisis episodes. Darling, Coccia and Senatore (2012) mention some of the other stressors that can lower women's life satisfaction in mid-life such as symptoms of menopause and hormone changes, sleep disturbances, reduced energy levels, body fat re-distribution and weight gain.

As discussed earlier, it is no surprise that it is women, and especially middle-aged women, who make up the largest proportion of wellness tourists. Again, research shows that different motivations exist around specific types of wellness tourism. Voigt et al for example (2011) discuss the beauty spa tourist, the lifestyle resort tourist and the spiritual retreat tourists as three quite separate entities. Women are attracted to all of these, and they all offer different forms of respite for the female body, mind and spirit.

Wellness tourism is often overtly multi-sensuous and explicitly an embodied experience (Lea, 2009). Thinking about tourism as constructed in a 'multi-sensuous way' (Dann and Nordstrand, 2009) makes it easier to view the intersections between tourist's embodied experiences and the spaces they are situated in (Edensor, 2000). Retreats are very much female, embodied spaces, where women can engage in social, spiritual or physical practices that collectively encourage holistic wellbeing outside their everyday contexts. Going back to 1996, Kinnaird and Hall (1996: 95) observed that whether we examine divisions of labour, the social construction of landscape, how societies construct the cultural 'other', or the realities of the experiences of tourist and hosts, it is possible to examine the issues of relationships, differences and inequalities resulting from tourism-related processes in terms of gender relations. This therefore allows us to differentiate to a certain extent between women's and men's construction, consumption and experiences of tourism. Retreats as sites of tourism are female dominated (Kelly, 2010, 2012) and as such are interesting spaces within which to observe how women rest, reflect and connect with the self and others.

Despite the tendency to assume that male appeals are universal appeals, research suggests that female and male perceptions and experiences of space differ substantially. Women are more concerned usually with the quality of the tourism experience and the process, while men are more oriented towards the activity and the visit (Pritchard and Morgan, 2000). Furthermore, Shields (1991) argues that any examination of space must explore its emotional geography. This term, arguably, is central to the place and space of retreat tourism, in so far as the creation of 'emotional communities' is critical for a deep, fulfilling experience for many visitors, especially women (see Glouberman and Cloutier's chapter in

this Handbook). It can be suggested therefore that holistic tourism in forms such as retreats, set themselves apart from traditional gendered power-relations inherent in much of the tourism sector. Swain (1995) states that men's capacity to control women's sense of security and self-worth has been central to the evolution of tourism politics. Holistic tourism retreats, in contrast, often enable women to reinforce, rediscover and reflect on their self worth. Unlike family holidays, where a mother usually makes decisions that prioritise the childrens' or whole families' preferences, retreat breaks are usually taken by solo women, and allow a woman to choose just for herself, a diminishing action for many women in today's society that ironically sells the myth of 'having it all'.

For women, both the sense of an informal, albeit temporary, sense of community, in the form of other guests, instructors and support staff helps to create a sense of safety and sharing. This is crucial in the nature of activities where life crises, uncertainty or identity challenges prompt women to literally retreat from their everyday lives. Motivations for women to go on holistic holidays include the need to overcome loss of emotional ties, demonstrate women's abilities, establish independence, escape from domesticity and the comfort in doing something alone (Kinnaird and Hall, 1996). In addition, there is a desire for connection with other women, the voyage of inner journeys, escapism from gendered responsibilities (young children and or elderly parents) and the draw of a place that is peaceful, safe and beautiful. Kelly (2012) notes the three elements of 'the place', 'the activities' and the 'intangible retreat experience' for retreat visitors. The latter, intangible experiences often centre around friendships made, problems shared or lightened, or a positive energy that is created through a mix of like-minded people doing something fulfilling.

Unlike many male-oriented activities, where patriarchal 'mastery' of a landscape (mountaineering for example, or other adventure sports) is embedded in a sense of performance or competition (even with the self), the female dominated activities of many retreat centres are inward-looking and focus on working with the body/mind. Yoga, for example often means rethinking or unlearning traditional physical instructions. Rowling (2005) commenting on a women-only yoga retreat, observed that she had gained insight into how to 'work *with* my body as woman, rather than against it'. She notes the special dynamic created by women-only audiences, where instructors concur that there is no external spirit of competition, only inwardly-directed competition in relation to self-work. This retreat work of offering women an understanding of their body and its specific needs during the transitional periods of her life (pregnancy, motherhood, menopause) allow women to be better armed psychologically for the transformations they face.

Male and female differences of perception towards these activities can be noticed. Indeed, Olano et al's (2015) research using the extensive US National Health Interview Survey 2002, 2007 and 2012 showed that men were half as likely as women to engage in meditation as well as mind-body exercise activities containing a mindfulness element (e.g. yoga, tai chi, qigong). In fact, they were three times less likely to practise yoga. Blowhard (2005) cites sources which suggest that yoga creates a state of vulnerability, especially emotional vulnerability, and that women tend to be more comfortable with this than men. He also quotes one online male yoga webchat participant who announced 'as far as getting in touch with my inner-whatever, that's the opposite of that I want to do with my free time. I want to

do something that gets me outside and engaged in the world. Introspection has its place, but inherently its a private and unstructured activity, rather than social and directed – at least it is for me...’

It can be seen from this section that retreats can serve multiple purposes depending on the needs of a particular individual at a given time in his or her life. It seems that men are less likely to partake of the experiences and activities offered by retreats, and that women, and especially middle-age women, tend to be the core market. Therefore, the following case study gives an example of a womens’ only retreat in the UK which serves this important and growing market.

### **Case Study:**

#### **Breathing Space, Norfolk.**

‘Breathing Space... for Women’ is a retreat centre based in the Norfolk Broads in the east of the United Kingdom. Indeed, the retreat name was suggested by one of the authors of this chapter! It was set up in a small barn conversion just over 10 years ago by its founder, an able woman on her own who had moved from London to escape the stresses of the city in favour of a quieter rural life. Over time the concept grew and Breathing Space now resides in a beautiful historic country manor house surrounded by lovely grounds and retreat spaces outside in nature. It is close to both the inland waterways of the Norfolk Broads as well as the coast just 1 km away. It is promoted as ‘the place for women on their own or with friends to come and relax, just ‘Breathe’ and feel the stresses of everyday life fall away, re-charge, re-energise and feel uplifted’ (Breathing Space, 2016). The founder says her motivation for starting the retreat was ‘to share the experience of living the Norfolk country life by the sea and to share the fun and freedom’ (personal interview, 2016). At the time she was living alone in her barn conversion and thought male guests might be intimidating in a small space, but as it turns out, she noted, women- only retreats have become a strong niche market. It is not only the visitors to retreats who seek these emotional geographies of safety and connection, but their owners too in many cases . Kelly’s (2010) work on retreat operators note both the lifestyle and the altruistic motivations of many retreat operators and this case studies supports these ideas.

The founder observes that ‘women feel free to be more themselves and more comfortable not having men around..they can connect with each other and there is no need to impress’. This supports research mentioned earlier about women’s need for community, and the freedom to be themselves, or indeed, their ‘authentic selves’. Success, says the founder of Breathing Space, is ‘creating a loving and nurturing environment, a feeling of community and family’.



### **Breathing Space...for Women, Norfolk. UK.**

The motivations to set up this retreat centre and its criteria for success are mirrored in the views of the guests who stay there. Unlike retreat centres that offer pre-determined programmes of activities (such as Skyros or Cortijo Romero in Spain), guests at Breathing Space are encouraged to choose what they would like to do from a wide range of possible offerings (see [breathingspacenorfolk.com](http://breathingspacenorfolk.com)) and this makes for a restful and bespoke experience. Visitors are offered do-it-yourself programmes to take advantage of various holistic therapies, engaging with nature, walks or other outdoor activities. Meditation, yoga, nutrition, massage and beauty treatments as well as many other spiritual therapies are on offer, given by in-house and also local community based practitioners. Breathing Space is one of only a few retreat centres that are strongly embedded in their local community and have won awards for Community Impacts in Tourism. 'Community' therefore, is something which is practiced and created for guests within the retreat space but also for locals as a place to gather, plan and share ideas. Many women practitioners of alternative or complementary therapies who live locally are employed by Breathing Space to deliver treatments as requested by guests. In addition, the centre also draws high profile speakers/performers and guests alike. So 'community' here is constructed both internally within the retreat space, as well as externally through real linkages with the locality.

Groups of women friends and relatives are catered for in this retreat, as are celebrations – a move away from traditional hen party hedonism. The food on offer is locally sourced and organic where possible, the founder is trained in nutrition and offers wholesome home-cooked food. In addition, aromatherapy organic products for the bathroom and face/body creams are also produced by the founder's own family 'Sorrells Naturally', and guests who use these products during their stay can purchase some to take home. All aspects of body, mind and soul are therefore catered for, in the true sense of an 'holistic' retreat.



Many of the guest reviews and visitor testimonials on the centre’s own website and TripAdvisor (2015/2016) indicate the motivations for going to a retreat and the benefits that can be gained from the experience:

‘Whatever rest means for you, this place has it all; gorgeous surroundings, nurturing food, truly kind people, restorative therapies, lovely nature reserves right nearby, the beach..’

‘As a busy working Mum and nurse I spend a lot of time looking after other people. It was such a lovely experience to be looked after myself!’

‘A place that worked miracles on me. I ran to Mags and team in the midst of a personal crisis. I was welcomed with open arms, nurtured and respected’.

‘The "family" at Breathing Space are wonderful and a sense of calm envelops you as you walk through the door’.

(visitor testimonials, TripAdvisor, 2015/16)



**The coast, the Broads and an onsite lake – therapeutic landscapes for everyone.**

The female visitors to Breathing Space meet many of the characteristics described in previous research. Nurturing, connections, and support are paramount. Women, requiring rest, peace or at a crossroads can find a fulfilling retreat experience offered by other women, who themselves have often had similar ‘journeys of the self’.

**Conclusion**

This chapter suggests that everyday life may not always afford individuals enough opportunities to resolve some of life’s challenges, especially at particular moments or stages in life (e.g. crisis, middle age). Journeys of the self may need to be taken in alternative locations to home, especially in retreat centres, many of which are purposely designed with self-development and transformation in mind. In cultures where speed, materialism, instant

gratification and over-consumption have become key characteristics, retreats can offer a range of mindful practices which bring individuals back to the 'here and now' and to a more existentially authentic sense of self – a 'true self', rather than one driven by ego, the 'social self' or the 'ideal self'. Women, particularly middle-aged women, are especially drawn to retreat activities and experiences and they tend to constitute one of the main markets for this form of tourism. This is even more likely to be the case if the retreat focuses on yoga. The case study in this chapter illustrated some of the benefits of women-only retreat centres, which can provide supportive, nurturing, restorative experiences for women who may have lost touch with elements of their self and identity in everyday life. Retreats offer individuals the opportunity to re-connect with themselves in the company of like-minded others, the inner and outer selves, body, mind and spirit combining together in a healing and holistic experience.

*'When you travel, you find yourself  
Alone in a different way,  
More attentive now  
To the self you bring along,  
Your more subtle eye watching  
You abroad; and how what meets you  
Touches that part of the heart  
That lies low at home...'* (John O'Donoghue: *Blessings*, 2007)

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