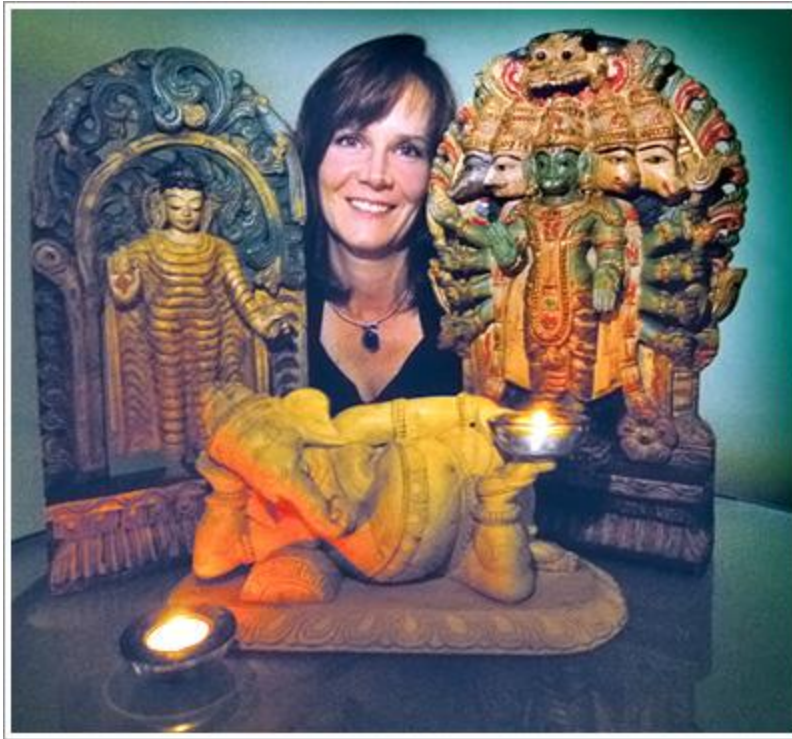


## Resorts respond to needs both spiritual and physical

B.C. is a hotbed of spiritual getaways and tour organizers

Glen Korstrom



Tara Alain didn't expect to return from her summer vacation in Peru inspired to found a spirituality workshop business. But a shaman helped the 39-year-old have a spiritual awakening on the shores of Peru's Lake Titicaca near Machu Picchu.

Alain returned to Squamish abuzz with newfound awareness and keen to open the Westmorland Place healing arts centre ([www.westmorlandplace.ca](http://www.westmorlandplace.ca)) so she could offer customers consciousness exploration workshops and overnight stays. She is one of a growing number of British Columbians who structure vacations around spiritual experiences. Exact numbers for

this industry are fleeting, but some estimates indicate that as many as 240 million annual international journeys involve some element of cultural tourism.

"I'm not a new-agey person or anything, but I was open enough to have this experience," she said. "I want to say it was like pure consciousness, although that sounds really hokey."

The last few years have seen a proliferation of B.C. businesses that cater to tourists who seek deeper meaning in their travels. These enterprises range from a travel agency that exclusively books spiritual journeys to yoga retreats to seaside meditation sanctuaries.

Alain searched the Internet for spiritual vacation options and discovered the **Sacred Earth Journeys** travel agency. When Alain's astrologer independently mentioned Sacred Earth Journeys as a good way to book vacations, Alain's curiosity was piqued.

She phoned Sacred Earth owner **Helen Tomei** and learned about a wealth of spiritual vacation options.

Tomei's travel agency grew the value of its trips sold to more than \$162,000 this year, and she expects to more than double that number next year. She won her second consecutive Inspiration Entrepreneur of the Year award in the tourism category October 27. Those awards are presented by nine Lower Mainland self-employment programs.

"Most of our tours include special offerings, like a private night entrance at Machu Picchu in Peru, an exclusive closing ceremony in the Great Pyramid in Egypt or a private entrance at Stonehenge, England, for a sacred ceremony and meditation," Tomei said.

Spiritually minded travelers who want to stay closer to home have an ever-increasing number of options.

Paradise Found Cottage Yoga Retreats owner Nomi Lyonns, who is also known by the spiritual name "Sat Guru," shifted the business plan at her Salt Spring Island escape last year.

Lyonns still rents cottages to people who don't partake in any spiritual awakenings or yoga, but she has started offering yoga retreat packages that include early morning yoga, organic vegetarian food, tours of local artist galleries and massages. Visitors can also opt to undergo a "master cleanse" where they exclusively drink a salty concoction for several days.

"Guests have full use of the space if they want to hang out and do their own reading, use the hot tub or the rowboat or swim or paint or whatever. Each retreat is different," said Lyonns, who also teaches yoga at Granville Island's Carousel Theatre.

Galiano Island getaway Serenity by the Sea is another getaway that has shifted from a conventional bed and breakfast to one that offers on-site spiritual retreats. Owners Shera Street and Chidakash have a side-business selling and leading 10-person tours to foreign destinations such as Machu Picchu and Bali.

Manager Andrea D'Onofrio has noticed more guests arrive seeking spiritual awakening at her island oasis, which can accommodate 12 guests.

Visitors can enjoy early morning yoga, meditation sessions, visits to a large labyrinth garden, cliffside bathtub soaks and physical exercises using what D'Onofrio calls a fitball.

They can pay extra for services such as massage, gestalt therapy, reiki and personal counseling or "creative discovery sessions," D'Onofrio said.

Her resort is one of many spiritual retreats around the province.

Spiritual travelers passing through B.C.'s Kootenay region can stop at the Kootenay Bay Yosodhara Ashram Yoga Retreat and Study Centre for either yoga classes or retreats. The Ashram site contains 12 buildings and can house approximately 100 people overnight. Revenues have grown at a consistent four to six per cent per year, said Yosodhara Ashram Society director Don Gamble.

Bowen Island's Xenia Creative Development Centre is a 38-acre sanctuary where visitors can discover what founder Angelyn Toth calls a "doorway through which one can know one's true nature as a direct experience."

And Dhyana Bartkow offers energy work, Hawaiian lomi lomi massage and yoga retreats at her Inner Moves getaway on the Sunshine Coast. Bartkow's home has two rooms to house Lower Mainlanders who stay at least two nights and buy her spirituality packages.