

# Travel: Near or far, it helps to get away

BY CHANTAL EUSTACE, VANCOUVER SUN    SEPTEMBER 25, 2009



Helen Tomei of Vancouver's Sacred Earth Journeys at the Mayan site of Calakmul, located at the base of the Yucatan Peninsula in the state of Campeche, Mexico.

**Photograph by:** Handout, ...

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Balancing in tree pose in an open-spaced yoga hut surrounded by the jungle, I inhale as the ocean explodes against Costa Rica's white sand shoreline, just metres from my mat.

Exhale. A blue and yellow butterfly dances past my shoulder and another wave crashes against a rock.

Just then, a feeling of complete contentment takes over. It spreads from my toes to my forehead. It's all-consuming. It's blissful.

Like many people in search of a spiritual awakening of some sort, this profound peace hit me far away from my ordinary life.

And it turns out, for most so-called "spiritual travellers" the destination is a big part of the journey itself.

While it's possible to be transported in your own backyard, most of us need a little help — a little push.

So it's no surprise that spiritual-focused travel is so popular.

Wellness retreats, yoga holidays, pilgrimages and sacred space meditations are no longer the granola-drenched domain of hippies or New Agers.

People of all walks of life are interested in travelling outside the box.

"I think people are looking for more of a deeper experience to their travel experience," says Helen Tomei, of Vancouver's Sacred Earth Journeys, specializing in spiritual travel.

"It's not your stereotypical new-agey people," she says, adding everyone from doctors and lawyers to home-makers are looking for what she calls "purposeful" and "intentional" travel.

"Personal growth and spiritual growth is more on the minds of people," Tomei says. "It's just a growing thing."

She says her six-year-old business is busier than ever, with more and more people searching for something beyond a typical holiday in the sun.

They offer guided tours to "sacred sites," like temples in Bali, England's Stonehenge or ashrams in India.

"The sites themselves can help with personal growth," she says, adding people can be impacted profoundly in a short period of time. "Really you can do a lot of transformation in 10 days."

Or less.

Swami Radhananda of B.C.'s Yasodhara Ashram says people often just need a few days to get recharged in a quiet, natural setting.

"A lot of of them, they like to get out of their routine," says Radhananda.

About 1,000 or so pilgrims from all over the globe head to the remote Kootenay Lake ashram each year for everything from meditation to chanting.

"This place is quiet," she says, of its appeal, adding she regularly sees people experience transformation.

"They arrive and they're in that busy mode," says Radhananda, born Mary Ann McDougall.

"And within a day or two they change. And they leave, and you can just tell, their faces are just relaxed. They are more happy. They are inspired to do something and take something home."

The modern world is hectic and urban life is noisy, says Father Mark Dumont, of the Westminster Abbey in Mission.

Monastic life is the opposite, he says, of the quiet lifestyle that appeals to visitors of the Abbey's guesthouse.

About 45 people come each weekend, he says, to stay on the 200-acre grounds.

"It's nice to have time to think," says Dumont. "It's nice to get away."

Near or far, there are plenty of places to choose from.

Most often, popular spiritual hot spots are ancient, like Spain's Camino de Santiago pilgrimage or a visit to India's holy city, Varanasi.

Others, are remote and encourage inner quiet, or a connection to the environment — like a kayak trip around Vargas Island in Clayoquot Sound.

The choices are endless.

Here are a few to consider, good for a weekend away or a more serious expedition.

### **Mount Kailash, Tibet:**

It's possible to walk the 53-kilometre pilgrim path around this mountain in one day but most people need at least three.

And since Kailash is so remote, situated in the isolated enclave of Western Tibet, it's a good idea to pack everything you'll need for the chilly trek.

It's worth a trip around the holy mountain though, since doing so is said to wipe out the sins of a lifetime — and not a bad way to burn a few calories.

It's a significant site for many religions, venerated by Buddhists, Jains, Hindus and the pre-Buddhist Bonpo. (For instance, Hindus believe it's the home of Shiva.)

Whatever you believe — or don't believe — the mountain possesses a stark beauty with its black rock face set against a pristine setting.

And since it comes steeped in spiritual history, it's a powerful place to sit quietly and contemplate the meaning of it all.

### **Haida Gwaii, B.C.**

It's not uncommon to see four or five bald eagles sitting on a piece of driftwood, watching the tide roll in.

Or to ride your bicycle past a giant black bear, grazing on berries on the side of the road.

The 400 islands of Haida Gwaii, also known as the Queen Charlotte Islands, are remote enough to have their own distinct rhythm or pulse — much slower than most city-dwellers can fathom.

And with all the massive expanses of ocean, forest and sky, it's impossible not to feel awe-struck by it all. To want to sit down on a rock and just relax by the surf.

There are also towering totems to admire and plenty of history rooted in the natural beauty of the islands. Like the southern Gwaii Haanas, home to the Haida people for thousands of years, listing about 500 historical sites.

All that, and it's just a BC Ferries ride away.

## **Dharamsala, India**

A visit to India can take you to many, many sacred sites — the country's loaded with shrines, temples and ashrams — from the ancient city of Varanasi to the yoga hub of Mysore.

You can also mingle with exiled Tibetan Buddhists at the current residence of the Dalai Lama, in the northern city of Dharamsala.

Whether you gain an audience with the spiritual leader or simply explore the spiritual spaces in this town — situated against the snow-capped Himalayas — there's plenty of opportunity for pondering.

And if you can plan your visit to include July 6, the Dalai Lama's birthday, you'll be plunged into multicultural celebrations and festivities.

## **Yasodhara Ashram, Kootenay Bay, B.C.**

Even if you've never actually touched your toes, a yoga retreat is an easy way to get limbered up both mentally and physically.

And since opening in 1963, the Yasodhara Ashram, an eco-friendly yoga community about 40 kilometres northeast of Nelson, has attracted spiritual travellers from all over the world.

Visitors to the ashram — described as a "sacred place that supports an inward process of spiritual development" — stay in guest lodges overlooking the lake and mountains.

## **Machu Picchu, Peru**

Chances are you've met someone who has stairmastered their way up to this historic Incan site.

You've probably seen photos of endless grey rocky structures set amidst the clouds in the Peruvian Andes.

But to fully appreciate why this is one of the so-called wonders of the world, it's best to put on a good pair of walking shoes and get trekking.

The climb takes you into the heavens — more than 2,300 metres above sea level — and hundreds of years into the past, all at the same time.

It takes about eight days to walk the 112 kilometre trail from Cusco. Along the way, you can shake off stress and focus on being present.

Eventually, you'll reach what feels like the top of the world: a good place to create your own mantra. A good place to look inside.

## **Westminster Abbey, Mission, B.C.**

Peace and quiet is just around the corner for bleary-eyed Vancouverites in need of a little rest and relaxation.

The Benedictine Monks who operate the abbey — they also run a school, guesthouse and farm —

welcome people of all spiritual inclination.

Day trippers can quietly walk the expansive grounds. Those in need of a little more solitude or time can opt to stay at the guesthouse.

Leave your Blackberry at home. You'll be amazed by what you discover when you give yourself a bit of space. A little you-time.

Or as the abbey's website says: "Seek peace and pursue it."

Near or far.

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