

REPORT ON HEALTH AND NUTRITION: RETREATS**Do everyone a favour: Get away from it all**

Breaking out of the hectic daily demands and taking time to rejuvenate is not just good for you, LUMA MUHTADIE writes. It's good for all the people around you

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Standing alone at the edge of Kawawaymog Lake, transfixed by the stars shimmering in the still black water, Susan Renaud could feel the tension draining from her body.

At home, she rises at five each morning, endures a hectic cross-border commute from Windsor to Detroit, and spends her long workdays at a large investment firm selling stocks and bonds.

"When I'm at home, even if I'm not working, it's never a change of pace," says Ms. Renaud, who is married with a teenaged daughter. "You put out one fire and suddenly there's another one -- someone needs to get to a function or your mom's sick or the bathroom shower curtain is falling down."

But at the Northern Edge Algonquin retreat, Ms. Renaud is surrounded by forests, rolling hills and rivers that meander into lakes. She awakens to loon calls instead of an alarm. Days begin with yoga on the dock, followed by a breakfast of pear-ginger multigrain pancakes, fresh fruit and organic coffee.

An afternoon might be spent paddling, hiking or lounging by the water with a book. Saunas and massages are *de rigueur*, and each night ends beside a campfire, with good conversation, stories and song.

"I don't know how to describe it other than to say it's completely rejuvenating," Ms. Renaud says.

Once the purview of religious types looking to reconvene with God, retreats have branched out into a plethora of offerings, spiritual and secular.

The modern retreat could involve vigorous activity in the rugged wilderness, meditation at a secluded monastery, creative writing classes or pampering at a spa -- anything that offers total escape from the frenzy of the daily grind and replaces ennui with inspiration.

The real problem isn't all the work we juggle daily, it's that we've completely forgotten how to take breaks, says Toronto-based stress and wellness expert Beverly Beuermann-King.

"We jam-pack our schedules, we multitask and we spend our free time checking our voice mails and going on-line," she says. "We also tend to over program our kids, so we're continually rushing around and there's no downtime, even with family."

A retreat means taking a timeout from the demanding roles foisted on us by our jobs, kids, aging parents and needy friends, and taking an opportunity to nurture ourselves.

Retreats remind us that we have bodies; that we have creative and emotional sides; that there's a picturesque world outside our busy lives beckoning us to come out and play.

And the people around us will be better for it, too.

Our loved ones will appreciate the genuine interest and undivided attention we can give them when we're completely collected. As for our bosses, a recent study of 375,000 U.S. employees published in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine found that "presenteeism" -- workers being on the job but not operating at top form because of sickness and stress -- is actually a bigger and more costly problem than absenteeism.

A snapshot of our work habits suggests we're long overdue for some changes of scene and pace.

According to the latest figures from Statistics Canada, more than one in five Canadians put in an average of 8.5 overtime hours each week, while the number of us working multiple jobs has almost quadrupled since 1976. More women have joined the work force -- especially mothers with young children -- and there are more women juggling multiple jobs than there are men.

But submitting to the call can be a daunting task, says Todd Lucier, founder and operator of the Northern Edge Algonquin resort that is now an annual respite in Ms. Renaud's busy life.

Mr. Lucier says that when his guests arrive, they're completely wired. "It takes everybody about 24 hours to stop looking for the next thing to do and to just get into the rhythm of not having a rhythm."

Visitors whose lives are commandeered by the clock feel especially out of their element when they first embark on a retreat, "but they

are the ones who get the most out of the experience, by far," he says.

If you want your retreat experience to be meaningful and memorable, first figure out what you want out of it.

Want to get a little closer to Mother Nature? Hike through wilderness? Raft? Ski? Climb? Meditate among monks? Figure out what's wrong with your life or your career? Develop your inner artist? Whatever your priorities, be sure to choose a retreat that's designed to meet them.

Another key consideration is time: The retreat you're planning should be long enough to allow you to completely unwind.

The longer you've gone without a vacation, the longer you're going to need, says Ms. Beuermann-King.

If you haven't stepped out of the whirlwind in a while, it may take two or three days just to catch up on your sleep, she says. "Only then do you start to reap the benefits of a relaxed mind, instead of jumping from thought to thought."

Here's a sample of a few of the retreat offerings available across Canada:

The Atlin Art centre is nestled beside Atlin Lake in Northern British Columbia, near the Alaskan-Yukon border. Views of snow-capped mountain peaks, clear blue water and fiords awaken the senses and get the creative juices flowing. Gernot Dick, a designer and former teacher who spent more than two decades working at art colleges in Toronto, built the centre in 1983 and has been running it ever since. Guests -- from beginners to professionals working in any visual medium -- can visit for weekends, weeks or months at a time. The rustic lodge houses two dozen people and provides little more than the basic amenities.

<http://www.atlinart.com>

L'Abbaye St. Benoit, a Benedictine monastery, houses 48 monks in Quebec's Eastern Townships. In operation since 1912, L'Abbaye St. Benoit has been gaining popularity among lay people seeking solace -- there is a waiting list for weekend stays. There are separate quarters for men and women, and plenty of solitude and quiet, with meals served in groups.

Everyone is welcome, regardless of religious persuasion -- "We never ask any questions," Brother Anselme Gravelle says. If they want it, guests are invited to convene with the monks in twice-daily prayer sessions, Gregorian chanting or counselling.

<http://www.st-benoit-du-lac.com>

An old farmhouse-turned-Tibetan Buddhist monastery along the Cabot Trail in Nova Scotia, Gampo Abbey has drawn monks from across the country, and as far away as Europe and Australia. The vast majority of visitors are Buddhists, but it's not a prerequisite.

If the religious rites here don't inspire, the immediacy of the natural surroundings -- strong winds, dramatic snowfalls, whales and eagles -- certainly will.

<http://www.gampoabbey.org>

For a fuller smorgasbord of possibilities, check out **<http://www.retreatonline.com>**.

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