



THE RISE AND RISE OF THE RADICAL SABBATICAL

THERE'S BEEN A POST-PANDEMIC BOOM
IN TRANSFORMATIONAL TRAVEL, BUT
CAN A BREAK FROM THE NORM ACTUALLY
CHANGE YOUR LIFE? *JENNY SOUTHAN*
GOES IN SEARCH OF A NEW DIRECTION

ONE NIGHT LAST SUMMER, I FOUND myself paddling out to sea on a transparent kayak that glowed in the dark with underwater lights. The black Caribbean water was warm and the sky glittered with stars. Looking back at the shore, I could see flaming torches on the beach, and the party I'd just left still in progress, with people milling around in animal fancy-dress costumes. I'd discarded my own rubber llama mask on the sand, and, as I breathed in the fresh air, the questions *How did I get here?* and, more importantly, *What next?* drifted through my mind.

I'd spent the past five days among a group of 20-plus strangers, all of whom had very different backstories (there was a millionaire nomad who was living in a luxury Winnebago, a commodities trader from Australia, and a professional poker player and Seventh Day Adventist who had both travelled over from middle America). But all of us had one thing in common: we'd been inspired to sign up to a life-changing holiday at the Aerial BVI, a private island in the British Virgin Islands. Run by American entrepreneur Britnie Turner, the retreat is a utopian hideaway in the Caribbean Sea, engineered to help people achieve mental, physical and financial transformations.

Searching for direction after turning 40, I was determined to rewire my understanding of money and turn my fledgling travel-trend-forecasting company into a profitable success story. With this in mind, I'd signed up for Turner's annual 'Abundance' summit (other retreats include 'Dream', 'Love' and 'Strength'), which teaches you how to generate wealth and use it as a force for good in the world through a combination of practical wisdom on real-estate investing and stock trading, as well as 'manifestation' and 'visioneering' techniques. The days on the island had been emotional and intense (there were tears at nightly dinners where we each had to stand up and share our realisations), but also exhilarating and euphoric. By the end, it felt like I'd been on the island for a month. My mindset had undergone a huge shift.

Since the pandemic, there has been a rise in people taking holidays with the express purpose of reassessing or improving their lives – these transformative short stints are called 'radical sabbaticals'. Whether we're suffering from milestone anxiety, considering leaving a partner, starting or stopping fertility treatment or dreaming of launching a business, there are times in

our lives when we feel we are at a crossroads, and need to make a big decision or take a leap of faith. Time away from the day-to-day, focusing on what really matters, can help you figure out the next step and, nowadays, many companies – from Patagonia to PayPal – offer sabbaticals of one to three months as a perk to loyal members of staff. Traditionally, these can be as long as a year, but for most people that's not viable, which is why we're seeing a rise in employees taking life-altering breaks from the norm that last just a few days or weeks. How 'extreme' you want your retreat to be depends on your objectives and willingness to evolve.

'Radical sabbaticals wake you up. They make you grow and become more conscious, forcing you to turn inwards and possibly face those important questions, decisions or life whispers that you've avoided for so long,' says Jenny Graham, founder of cutting-edge life-coaching agency Saguaro. 'Sometimes we can be so busy working in our lives that we forget to work on our lives,' adds Nick Hatter, one of the UK's leading

life coaches. 'Going to a new place physically can help to provide us with a space for new perspectives.'

And so we're seeing a fresh breed of highly curated concepts emerge, designed to treat a panoply of human needs with laser-like precision. Whether you are seeking purpose or searching for possibility, sites such as Healing Holidays and Queen of Retreats are a good starting point when looking for the right radical sabbatical. From emotional balance retreats in Thailand (Kamalaya) and trauma-resolution surf camps in Morocco (Resurface) to business planning in Costa Rica (Ralia) and creativity holidays in Greece (Skyros), there is a rapidly growing array of mission-specific group getaways to help you fast-track your progress.

Tania Carriere is the CEO of Advivum Journeys, which organises transformational trips that are guided by professional therapists at Goodnestone Park Manor in Kent. Why should someone take part? 'The radical sabbatical is designed to open you up to a new sense of possibility while leaving behind whatever weighs you down,' she says. 'Identity used to be defined by place or by age or by role. But now we are not leaving things to chance – we're choosing to define and redefine ourselves and what it means to live our "best lives".'

Taking a slightly different approach, bespoke-travel company Black Tomato has designed a series of seven 'Bring it Back' trips to destinations including Copenhagen, Peru and Cuba, which give individual travellers access to expert insiders who act as mentors and motivators. The idea is that you depart with a question and return with an answer. Tom Marchant, co-founder of Black Tomato, says: 'We're seeing these trips appeal to people more than ever, as rediscovering their purpose both personally and professionally is a priority, whether it's reigniting their entrepreneurial flame with business experts in Iceland or finding inspiration with art, design and technology collectives in Morocco. Other immersive itineraries focus on key areas of life such as family and community, sustainability and wellness.'

But can you really change yourself in a short amount of time? 'Yes,' Carriere says. 'Change can happen in an instant. If you have given yourself permission to be and see differently, and can lean into a sense of possibility instead of constraint, change is inevitable. What takes time is finding the courage to let go of

certainty, to play with new answers, to dare to contradict the voices in your head that tell you how you "should" be. When we travel, we naturally change our environment, our circumstances and our point of view. As these things change, so does our self-knowledge – and that is the golden moment when we dare to grab onto something more.'

For Michael Boydell, a life coach to CEOs, presidents and elite athletes, a more radical retreat is necessary for those wanting to evolve their identity. 'That doesn't mean spending lots of money or subjecting oneself to hardship or suffering. A well-designed radical sabbatical disrupts one's sense of normal. It begins with a clear, honest and solo intention. It challenges boundaries while ensuring physical and psychological safety. It is guided by a credible expert capable of meeting you where you are and guiding your own process of self-discovery and self-renewal.'

Saguaro's Jenny Graham, who runs her own six-day retreats through her other company Deep Rest, says that coaching pre, post and during the trip 'supports clients as they prepare for their sabbatical, to help them navigate their inner and outer worlds while on the retreat and support them with integration after they leave'. This is particularly useful when trying to reflect and readjust in a condensed period of time. 'While exciting, to suddenly change course or get still can be confronting. Many of us dream of the escape, not having to wake up to work every day and having lots of free time. Yet, in reality, since we live in an always-on, plugged-in society, and often define ourselves by our job status and busyness, it may take some adjustment.'

From my own experience, I agree that, even when you're in paradise, going on a journey of transformation is a rollercoaster. But was my own radical sabbatical effective? I'm yet to be a decabillionaire – but it's only been a few months. What I have learned, though, is to think bigger, be audacious, identify and overcome 'limiting beliefs' and have faith that money will come to me (the teachings align with the 'lucky girl' movement trending on TikTok). There must be something in it, because I pulled off a big event in January, won my first industry award and have more paying clients than ever. Self-belief is a powerful force, and that is just part of what clicked for me aboard that kayak in the middle of the Caribbean Sea. □

HOW TO TAKE A 'THINK WEEK'

BILL GATES HAS BEEN DOING THEM SINCE THE 1980S. HERE'S HOW TO PLAN YOUR OWN SEVEN-DAY ESCAPE

- 1 FIND A PLACE IN NATURE WHERE YOU CAN STAY WITH MINIMAL DISTRACTIONS
- 2 CHOOSE ACCOMMODATION THAT'S COMFORTABLE AND PLEASING
- 3 EMBRACE NOT BEING CONNECTED TO THE INTERNET
- 4 PACK SOME BOOKS, PENS AND A NOTEBOOK
- 5 LISTEN TO PODCASTS OR THE RADIO SO YOU FEEL LESS ALONE
- 6 GO TO BED EARLY AND GET UP WHEN IT'S LIGHT
- 7 PLAN YOUR MEALS AND TRY TO AVOID ALCOHOL
- 8 SPEND TIME WALKING OUTDOORS
- 9 DECIDE ON YOUR OBJECTIVES BUT DON'T WORRY IF YOU DON'T COME UP WITH A 'MILLION-DOLLAR IDEA'
- 10 TREAT IT AS AN INVESTMENT IN YOURSELF – NOT A HOLIDAY



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