

# SHAPE

## How to Turn Your Next Trip Into a Self-Care Vacation

Vacationing with a purpose — to celebrate running a half marathon or to recover from a breakup — will energize and inspire you.

By **Pamela O'Brien**

Updated June 04, 2021



CREDIT: ALEKSANDARNAKIC/GETTY

There are vacations you take to sightsee and those you plan around a favorite activity, whether it be surfing, hiking, or lounging at the beach. They're loads of fun, for sure. But the trips that will really have an impact on you and change you in lasting ways are the ones you take for a specific purpose.

Known as intentional travel, these are the getaways that help you heal from something sad — a job loss, a relationship ending — or celebrate an accomplishment, such as a promotion, a milestone birthday, or the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. "Think of them as self-care vacations: They offer the opportunity to nurture *you*," says Jaime Kurtz, Ph.D., and associate professor of psychology at James Madison University and the author of The Happy Traveler: Unpacking the Secrets of Better Vacations (Buy It, \$21, amazon.com). "They let you stop, catch your breath, relax, and really look inward." (Here's how to make time for self-care IRL too.)

Because they provide an emotional payoff that your average vacay just doesn't deliver, intentional trips can be incredibly powerful. "They give us the time to really think about things in a way we can't in our busy everyday lives, so that we can put what happened in perspective," says Kurtz. That, in turn, can act as a catalyst to help us move in new directions. "By giving you the space you need to problem-solve, intentional trips help you make big decisions about things you want to change in your life," says Sally Fisher, M.D., an assistant clinical professor at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine and the medical director at Sunrise Springs Spa Resort in Santa Fe. (These tips will help you use your vacation to \*actually\* relax.)

No wonder, then, that purpose-driven getaways are becoming more popular. They're considered a type of wellness tourism, which is growing about 50 percent faster than general tourism, according to a report from the Global Wellness Institute. "People are searching for more meaning in their lives, and these trips can help them find it," says Dr. Fisher.

Ready for a little enlightened travel of your own? These guidelines will help you pick the best mind-boosting getaway.

# 1. Know your endgame.

First and foremost, figure out what you want to get out of your trip. For instance, if you're between jobs, are you looking for a way to boost your spirits and self-esteem? Or are you hoping to brainstorm new opportunities? Celebrating a big birthday may be a moment to commemorate and reflect. Don't be afraid to aim high with your goals: "Travel makes the mind more expansive, research shows, so that you can think about your situation in new ways, rather than being caught in the same mental loop that you find yourself in at home," says Dr. Fisher. Once you've settled on your objectives, you can start considering destinations, says Kurtz. Being specific about what you want to achieve is instrumental to making the right choice: A spa or a retreat where you can take classes, be pampered, and do meditation might be the best fit if you're after self-reflection, while an adventurous rock climbing or mountain biking trip that gets your adrenaline going could release a flood of creative ideas.





## 2. Embrace the unknown.

"Experiencing new things is the way you flourish and grow," says Kathryn Smerling, Ph.D., a psychotherapist in New York. "During lockdown, when every day is Groundhog Day, you start to feel emotionally numb. Travel breaks you free of that, gives you excitement, and helps you feel pleasure fully again."

More specifically, an intentional trip with activities that push you out of your comfort zone and require your mind and body to be fully engaged will make you feel reenergized. Case in point: learning a new skill, such as sailing, demands your complete attention and is mentally and physically invigorating. (And that's not the only health benefit of trying something new.)

"Nothing puts fresh perspective on your life like stepping out of it for a while and doing something completely new," says Dr. Fisher. "You'll start to think differently and come up with solutions to problems you never would have thought of before."

You'll also feel a sense of pride for conquering a challenge. This is especially important if you've just gone through a negative experience like a breakup, says Kurtz. Instead of lying on a beach and ruminating about what went wrong, do something fun and active that will boost your confidence and make you feel in charge.

To get your fix: Head to the new Miraval Berkshires in Lenox, Massachusetts, offers transformative activities like beekeeping, equine therapy, medicinal tea making, aerial yoga, sound healing, and chakra reading. For some active Zen, hike through the property's 380 peaceful acres.

### **3. Get back to nature.**

Spend time outdoors, and within minutes you'll feel happier and more relaxed. "Studies show that being in nature lowers the stress hormone cortisol and improves your mood," says Dr. Fisher, who advises the guests she works with at Sunrise Springs to take trail walks or practice outdoor yoga. (Related: These Secluded Vacation Spots Will Help You Reconnect with Nature — and Yourself)

The beauty of nature can even evoke feelings of awe or wonder in us that boost our physical and mental health, according to a study at the University of California, Berkeley. Awe is associated with lower levels of inflammation-producing proteins in our bodies called cytokines, the researchers say. As a result, our immune systems become stronger and our emotions grow more positive. Plus, "you feel part of something bigger and more profound," says Alice Boyes, Ph.D., the author of The Healthy Mind Toolkit (Buy It, \$16, amazon.com). Places with spectacular scenery, like soaring mountains or dramatic canyons, are especially powerful.

Take advantage of this natural healing by booking a trip to a natural wonder, such as the Grand Canyon, the Rocky Mountains, or Big Sur with Escape Adventures, which offers road and mountain bike trips complete with stays in cozy inns and healthy meals. Then double the benefits by being active. Just like nature, exercise reduces stress, heightens mood, and builds immunity. So go on a long trail run, hike through a forest, or snorkel in the ocean. "You'll feel rejuvenated and be inspired to get out of the rut you might be in," says Dr. Fisher. "Intentional travel takes you to another place, literally and figuratively."





escape\_adventures  
White Rim Trail, Utah

View Profile



[View More on Instagram](#)



26 likes



## 4. Push your personal boundaries.

"You act differently in different places," says Smerling. "On vacation, you might be looser and let yourself have more fun, or maybe it brings out your daring side." And you can take that newfound sense of adventure home to liven up your day-to-day, says Boyes. Go zip-lining, paddleboarding, Jet Skiing, biking, and horseback riding, or play tennis or golf, at the 750-acre Grand View Lodge in Nisswa, Minnesota, where it will feel like summer camp in the best possible way. (Related: Experiential Travel Is the Secret to Getting More Out of Your Next Active Vacation)