



Healing Holidays

Low energy, high stress and even disease can improve on vacation. A heli-yoga trip in the remote mountains of British Columbia shows how taking a break can help you heal.

BY ALEXANDRA REDGRAVE | ILLUSTRATIONS BY AARON McCONOMY

Finding a sense of equilibrium can be challenging when your limbs are tightly intertwined and your thoughts begin to drift at 1,500 metres. But here I am, settling into what yogis call the Eagle pose, with one leg tucked under the other, arms spiralling until palms touch, my gaze fixed past my fingertips on the razor-sharp summit of the Hound's Tooth mountain spire glinting in the late-afternoon sun. My mind is clear and I am... balanced. High in the Bugaboo Mountains of southeast British Columbia, I've eased into what locals call mountain time, slowing down to match Mother Nature's steady pace.

This sense of serenity was one of elation just hours prior, when I boarded a helicopter with 10 other passengers and soared over the smooth slate forehead of a great

mountain face, the ragged horizon swelling up and hemming in a swath of brilliant blue sky, before descending five minutes later to Bugaboo Lodge. As part of a three-day heli-yoga trip with Canadian Mountain Holidays, the lodge becomes my base for exploring farther afield: I swim in a deliciously cool glacier lake, nap in a meadow of wild alpine flowers and contemplate snow dripping down Rockypoint Ridge like ice cream melting on a warm summer day.

During a session of walking meditation, I follow sprightly yoga instructor Anne Douglas' suggestion to "stop thinking and start sensing" – forgetting the deadlines, to-do lists and half-finished projects that structure my routine back home and concentrating instead on the spongy moss beneath my feet. The buoyant sensation makes me feel as if I'm

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padding through a lunar landscape, intensifying my connection to the pristine surroundings. From these small pleasures comes great relief: deep sleep, quiet mind and limber body. Entering a state of what Anne describes in class as “body attuned, mind atoned,” I feel whole again.

What my body felt, scientific research can back up. A nine-year study conducted by the State University of New York in Oswego found that

men aged 35 to 57 who were at risk of heart disease reduced their chances of suffering a fatal heart attack by 30 percent if they took annual vacations – a finding that suggests skipping holidays could actually be hazardous to your health. Similarly, a study published in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* of almost 20,000 Canadians showed that physically active leisure – including travel – has been found to



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directly contribute to higher levels of physical and mental well-being.

According to Dr. Mel Borins, a Toronto-based family physician and author of *Go Away Just for the Health of It*, taking time off helps you gain perspective. “Vacations allow you to step off the treadmill of life,” he says, noting that patients with symptoms of depression and headaches “markedly improved” while on holiday.

As Montreal-born neuroscientist Dr. Esther Sternberg explains in her book *Healing Spaces: The Science of Place and Well-Being*, environment also has a profound effect on wellness. “When you’re on vacation, you’re immersed in a setting where you have all of these healthy stimuli... Your brain downshifts from a stress response to a relaxation response and releases nerve chemicals and hormones that boost your immune system’s ability to fight disease.”

Yet from 1998 to 2005, leisure time in Canada declined by two hours per week, while the average

work week increased from 44.6 to 46.3 hours. According to a survey released in May 2009, Canadians accumulate 34 million untaken vacation days per year. For those who can’t fit a holiday into their schedule, both Sternberg and Borins recommend taking whatever time you can (by tacking on an extra day to a business trip, for example), making it count (turn off the cellphone and laptop) and integrating healthy habits picked up during a vacation (like eating well and staying active) upon returning home. Even contemplating a photograph of a beautiful view from your vacation can spark positive memories and temporarily reduce stress.

After my time in the Bugaboos, I feel much like the nimble machine that showed me such awe-inspiring sights: strong yet light, rooted but ready to soar. Heading east along the gently winding road to Alberta, crossing over the Great Divide, I see an auspicious sign: “Mountains shall bring peace to the people.” ■

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