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YOUR NEXT VACATION COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE

*Research shows that vacations can improve mental acuity and reduce the risk of heart disease, depression, and a host of other ills. **Margot Dougherty** explores the curative powers of travel and offers a dozen getaways to heal the body and soothe the mind*

E Esther Sternberg needed a break. After spending months as a long-distance caregiver for her terminally ill mother, she developed inflammatory arthritis. The irony wasn't lost on Sternberg, a research scientist at the National Institutes of Health who studies the link between stress and disease. Shortly after her mother died, neighbors invited Sternberg to vacation with them at their cottage in Crete. "I was in this beautiful spot, an isolated village on the south coast of the island," she

INSIDE

OO **Rx FOR THE HEALTHY ESCAPE**
How to make the most of your time off.

OO **FEEL-GOOD GETAWAYS**
Healing holidays around the world.

OO **WHAT'S A BODY TO DO?**
Alternative treatments explained.



Tips and Tools

Rx for the Healthy Escape

Not all time off is created equal. Here's what the latest research shows you can do to make your next getaway as salubrious as possible.

→ A week is all you need: Trips of seven days or more are the most restorative. Taking fewer trips of longer duration is better for you than taking multiple mini holidays.

→ Keep travel through time zones to a minimum: Jet lag is a form of stress and can undo most of the health benefits of getting away. If you want to get far away and return to the office refreshed and ready to work, travel north or south to avoid a painful reentry. (Note: The time it takes to reach a destination neither diminishes nor increases the benefits of travel.)

→ Keep scheduling to a minimum: Any type of commitment—meeting with friends or family, checking e-mails, calling the office, or even following an itinerary—will reduce the curative effects of travel. Freedom from obligations is key to a healthy holiday.

→ Choose a resort or cruise over a remote cabin in the woods: We might crave time alone, but making new acquaintances has been shown to increase the restorative power of a vacation. So, go ahead and attend the manager's cocktail party—it's good for you.

→ Get off your beach chair: You'll feel more rejuvenated if you incorporate a moderate amount of physical activity (regular walking tours or other light exercise) into your vacation than you will if you spend it lounging the whole time.

→ Keep it warm and light: We don't need scientific research to figure this one out, but studies confirm that, in general, staying in a sunny destination provides greater health benefits than choosing one that has shorter days.

says. "I swam every day in a wonderful calm cove and I started walking more every day. I ate a healthy Mediterranean diet, and had lots of social support from the many grandmothers in town who took care of me." Sternberg says she'd climb the hill to the Temple of Asclepius (perhaps not so coincidentally the Greek god of healing) and relax while looking out at the bougainvillea, the white stucco houses, and the sea. "I realized that I wasn't going to let my body heal unless I let go and built into my life the kinds of things I was doing there. The experience convinced me to change my lifestyle."

When she got back to her home in Bethesda, Sternberg continued to swim and take time out to "reflect and be quiet," and her arthritis

35%
OF AMERICAN WORKERS
DO NOT USE ALL OF
THEIR VACATION TIME



receded. "My story may not be scientific," she says, but it's an individual testimonial to the potential beneficial effects of vacation on health." And on work: A PBS special based on her research, *The Science of Healing* with Dr. Esther Sternberg, airs on PBS later this fall.

Common sense has always suggested that vacations are good for you, but now, more and more, science is proving what we've known all along. In 1992, a follow-up to the massive Framingham Heart Study showed that participants who took the fewest vacations were most likely to suffer a

heart attack. A subsequent study, published in 2000, tracked female patients with heart disease over a nine-year period. "The results," says Brooks Gump, one of the lead researchers, "show an association between taking an annual vacation and a reduced risk of heart attacks and death."

Vacations may even stave off old age. "The ends of chromosomes are like the plastic ends of shoelaces," says Sternberg, crediting the work of Alyssa Epplé, a researcher at the University of California at San Francisco. "As you age, these ends fall off, the shoelaces unravel, and the chromosomes shorten. If you are chronically stressed, the rate at which this happens speeds up, so people can have chromosomes that are 10 to 17 years shorter than their biological age." Stress has also been shown to ignite or exacerbate ailments ranging from headaches to heart disease, colds to cancer. "To the extent that the kinds of things you do on vacation have been shown to reverse the negative effects of stress, I think we can conclude that vacations can only help," Sternberg says.

Yet in spite of the clear benefits of getting away, Americans take fewer vacations than any culture in the industrialized world: Finland and France, for instance, require their citizens to take at least six weeks off a year, while the United States has no mandatory minimum vacation time and nearly a third of Americans don't use all of the time off that they're allotted.

Vacations, of course, can range from a do-nothing week on the beach to a cultural and shopping tour of a European capital to a high-adrenaline adventure in the Amazon. But the good news, according to experts, is that most any type of vacation can benefit health to some degree because people tend to be

Where to go

Feel-Good Getaways

EVERY CULTURE HAS ITS OWN BRAND OF HEALING.



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FRANCE

Euripides noted seawater's curative powers in 480 B.C., but the French ran with the idea in the 1900s, building *centres de thalassothérapie* up and down the Normandy coast. Today, thalassotherapy is de rigueur at most of Europe's hottest sun spots.

The Treatment A seaweed wrap followed by a neck-high soak in heated ocean water while being pummeled by hydromassage.

The Benefits Proponents maintain that the combination of mineral-rich algae, salt air, and seawater relieves eczema, psoriasis, back pain, respiratory illness, arthritis, sports injuries, and stress.

The Places In Brittany, the Thermes Marins de Saint-Malo has been the spa of choice for the haut monde since the nineteenth century (33-2-99-40-75-00; thalassotherapie.com; doubles, \$330, in-



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cluding treatments). Corsica's Ajaccio Bay is a stunning backdrop for the state-of-the-art Sofitel Thalassa Porticcio (33-4-95-29-40-40; sofitel.com; doubles, \$460-\$900).

ISRAEL

The air around the Dead Sea, at 1,000 feet below sea level, contains nearly five percent more oxygen than the air at sea level.

The Treatment A mud pack and

happier and less stressed when they anticipate them and happy—and sleeping longer and better—while they're away. Of course, for travel to improve health significantly, we need to play an active role and make healthy choices: A week in Paris binging on foie gras and cognac may not have the residual rejuvenating effect you're hoping for. "People often look at vacations as a time to drink too much and eat

**AN ANNUAL VACATION
CAN CUT A PERSON'S RISK
OF HEART ATTACK BY**

50%



unhealthy food, and too much of it," says Andrew Weil, the physician and best-selling author. "If we begin to consider the possibility that vacations can be health promoting, that's a very good thing."

Michael Irwin, director of UCLA's Cousins Center for Psychoneuroimmunology (the study of the interaction between the mind and the nervous and immune systems), agrees. "We get stuck in ruts, and vacations can help us develop healthy patterns we can carry into our lives," he says.

A sure way to up the health quotient of a vacation and is to choose one of the growing number of destinations that focus on wellness. The ancient Greeks built temples to Asclepius far from their cities, where travelers engaged in spa-like purification rituals (including the licking of wounds by sacred dogs). "The Greeks didn't refer to their visits as vacations," Sternberg says, "but the temples were effectively a means of getting away and being in an atmosphere where they could immerse themselves in music, dreams, healthy exercise and food, and clean water. And they had beautiful views overlooking the sea."

Today's temples to wellness are much the same. At places like Miami's Pritikin Longevity Center and the Miraval resort and spa in Tucson, Arizona, where Weil is the director of integrative medicine, the idea that vacations can promote health has proven a successful business model: Despite the economic downturn—or perhaps because of it—Miraval is among a number of health-oriented retreats

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reporting record bookings. "With this recession, people have more stress, so they're looking for things that are good for the body and the spirit as well. The mind-set is no longer about indulgence," says Susie Ellis, co-founder of Spa Finder, Inc, whose web site, spafinder.com, serves up information on 8,500 spas worldwide. "People today want to know more about Ayurveda [the ancient Indian health science] and energy medicine like reiki [a Japanese form of healing]. There's a desire to gain health, not just have a gold dust facial."

The Pritikin Longevity Center was way ahead of the curve on that one. For TK years, it has promoted exercise and a high-carb, low-fat, low-sodium diet with an emphasis on fresh ingredients to combat obesity, diabetes, high cholesterol, and myriad other ailments. Doctors monitor guests' progress during their stay, but the medical aspects are offset by the location and amenities. A stone's throw from the ocean, flanked by golf courses, and equipped with tennis courts, a pool, and a spa offering Moroccan mineral tanning treatments, the center turns the pursuit of health into a luxury vacation experience.

Rob Rago, a 48-year-old computer salesman from Hallandale Beach, Florida, who was tipping the scales at 270 pounds, signed up for a week's stay at the center last year, where he lost seven pounds working out daily and eating right. More significant, Rago acquired the tools to lose more on his own. At one class he learned how to grill fresh seafood and make healthy soup. At another, he got help decoding food labels. "In the afternoon you have classes, and at night you have guest speakers," says Rago. "After the third day, I didn't miss one of them."

Six months after returning home, he had lost 90 pounds and his cholesterol had dropped from 260 to 150. "My doctor made me take the test twice," he says. "He couldn't believe it." The health benefits of a vacation are longer lasting—in Rago's case life-chang-

sulfur-spring soak followed by a float.

The Benefits The concentrated oxygen has been shown to ease asthma, cystic fibrosis, and other lung diseases. Mineral-rich mud increases blood circulation and relieves swelling, soreness, and stiffness caused by arthritis. Dead Sea salts are an effective treatment for



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skin diseases such as psoriasis. Bromide, found here in 50 times the concentration of that in ocean water, has a soothing effect on the nervous system.

The Places Resorts line both the Israeli and Jordanian coasts. For plenty of peace and quiet, try Jordan's Mujib Chalets, an eco-resort in a nature reserve (962-7-97203888; rscn.org.jo; chalets, \$92).

MEXICO

Mayan medicine considers not only physical ills but the balance of "life force," or *ch'ulel*, in the body.

The Treatment *Sasil-tun*, a hot jade-stone massage, and *zumpulche*, a sweat bath in a sacred cave.

The Benefits Adherents believe that the hot and cold treatments and use of jade can balance energy, create a sense of overall wellness, and boost kidney function.



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The Places Hacienda Chichen Resort, next to the ruins of Chichén Itzá, has a holistic center staffed almost entirely by the local Mayans (52-999-920-8407; haciendachichen.com; doubles, \$120).

JAPAN

The Japanese have sought healing in their volcanic hot springs, or *onsen*, for thousands of years.

The Treatment Contemplation of Zen gardens followed by *meshi*,

The Breakdown

What's a Body to Do?

A LOOK AT SOME ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS ON THE MENUS AT SPAS AND HEALTH CENTERS, WITH A MEDICAL APPRAISAL FROM EDITOR DR. RICHARD DAWOOD

CUPPING

The claim: Relieves headache, backache, paralysis, infections. **The treatment:** A heated glass cup is placed on the skin to create suction, which draws the flesh into its void. **The backstory:** Made famous in 2004 when those odd circles showed up on Gwyneth's (otherwise unblemished) back (Gwyn told Oprah it's better than antibiotics). When the Chinese first cupped with hollow cattle horns in the

CHROMATHERAPY

The claim: Delivers holistic health and treats myriad conditions from sore throats to skin problems. **The treatment:** During massage, wavelengths of light (a.k.a. colors) are targeted on each of the body's seven chakras of spiritual energy, from the base of the spine to the top of the head. Red cures asthma,

CRANIOSACRAL THERAPY

The claim: Cures slipshod spines and fried nerves from the neck to the sacrum. **The treatment:** A practitioner traverses patient's head with his hands; contrary to the mainstream idea of a solid skull, the therapy is based on the belief that the cranium's bones are like hard gills that can shift to relieve pressure. **The backstory:** American

ENEMAS

The claim: Detoxifies, relieves constipation. **The treatment:** Water is injected through the anus into the rectum and colon (detox enemas use coffee or herbal tea to rev digestion and liver functions), then expelled along with feces for an inner deep clean. **The backstory:** Louis XIV and John Donne were fans during the enema's seventeenth-century heyday, but it was first used by ancient Egyptians and noted in the Ebers Papyrus, dated 1500 b.c. **Our doctor says:** Good for helping prepare for a clear view before colon imaging, but

EAR CANDLEING

The claim: Degunks the heads of cold- and flu sufferers (while cleaning auras and stimulating energy flow). **The treatment:** Candling doesn't actually involve any auricular excretions: A slim, hollow candle is placed in the ear canal and burned for ten minutes while wax (from the candle, not the ear) collects in a

AROMATHERAPY

The claim: Fights infections, pain, stress, sour moods. **The treatment:** Essential oils are diffused, burned, dropped in baths, or massaged into the skin. **The backstory:** Ancient Egyptian masseurs first slathered pyramid builders with frankincense and galbanum (believed to be the gods' sweat) during therapeutic

BIOFEEDBACK

The claim: Manages asthma, headaches, hot flashes. **The treatment:** Biofeedback patients are hooked up to electromyograms, electroencephalograms, and sensors that track temperature

REIKI

The claim: Eases emotions, speeds healing. **The treatment:** Practitioner lays palms around the stomach, head, knees, and feet; recipients report feeling tingling, warmth, and deep calm. **The backstory:** A priest/doctor living in Kyoto in the early 1900s founded Reiki by blending Christian healing and Buddha's

REFLEXOLOGY

The claim: Calms stress, fights fatigue. **The treatment:** Feet are squeezed, prodded, and pushed on "pressure points" that correspond to areas of the body. Some believe that pinching a pinkie can lessen shoulder pain, others see

furo, neru—a long soak, a meditative dinner, and then bedtime.

The Benefits Nine types of *onsen* water are officially recognized as having proven medical benefits. For instance, a high concentration of sulfur is believed to help rheumatism; alkaline waters are used to treat arthritis.

The Places In the shadow of Mt.



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Yufu-dake, Ryokan Kamenoi Besso has six Western-style rooms and 15 traditional Japanese-houses set among the trees and springs (81-977-84-3166; onsen-academy.ne.jp/~gakkai/en/; cabins, \$335 per person, including meals).

CALIFORNIA

Long before they became the favored healing baths of naked hippies and new agers, the cliff-top mineral springs at the Esalen Institute, in California's Big Sur, were revered by the native Esalen peoples, who called them Tokitok, or the God in the Springs.

The Treatment As simple as a good long soak.

The Benefits Geothermal springs are packed with minerals thought to have curative properties. For instance, lithium is said to improve mental balance and aid in digestion, iron is good for the immune system and prevents fatigue, and arsenic relieves arthritis.



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The Places The Esalen Institute has two- and five-day all-inclusive workshops in subjects ranging from tantric sex to TK; offerings include Thai massage and music healing workshops (831-667-3005; esalen.org; prices TK).

HAWAII

Ancient Hawaiians believed that disease resulted from spiritual disharmony. Practitioners of the holistic healing tradition *lomilomi* use prayer and massage to rebalance energy and promote health.

The Treatment A prayer by the

ing—when travelers adopt tools to keep stress or unhealthy behaviors at bay upon our return. “For any vacation to logically have lasting effects on physical health,” as Gump puts it, “the vacation must extend beyond the vacation.”

Despite a 20-year practice of yoga and a conscientious diet, it's safe to say I was in need of the restorative properties of a health-focused vacation this spring, when I found myself laid off as a magazine editor and watching my industry implode from the sidelines. I decided to check into the Chopra Center, at the La Costa Resort and Spa in Carlsbad, California. The center was founded by integrative health guru, Deepak Chopra and his business partner David Simon, physicians who espouse the importance of meditation, diet, yoga, and positive intent. When these vital cylinders are firing in sync, they say, health, success, and agelessness result. Count me in.

The drill started before I even arrived, when Chopra's book *Perfect Health* arrived at my home along with a packet of capsules called triphala that are described as a colon tonic. I'm to begin a cleansing diet—no salt, sugar, caffeine, alcohol, or meat—five days before checking in at the center, and take two triphala each night (a far cry from the yoga retreat I once went to in Brazil, where we ate beef, drank *caipirinhas*, and shared candy).

Once there, my days were filled but leisurely. Meditation and yoga sessions in the morning, followed by classes about Ayurveda and meditation, and more yoga and meditation in the evening. We're told to drink buckets of ginger tea and take our triphala faithfully.

The highlight and lowlight of each day were the treatments. The massages were invariably delightful. Offsetting the sheer bliss of these oil-slicked treatments were the afternoon enemas. They're called bastis at Chopra, but an enema by any other name...

On the plus side, the

bastis are a small part of the day. The yoga is geared to a broad spectrum of guests, some of whom have physical limitations, so the classes don't go beyond an elementary nod to basic postures. Rice and dahl are provided for lunch on three days, and an Ayurvedic chef prepares more interesting meals—vegetable curry, tempeh wraps—on the other two. The sugar-laden power bars stacked in the Dharma room, on the other hand, don't seem very healthy. “Bliss balls” made of ghee, sesame, and raisins were doled out to bolster the triphala and senna. “I don't know,” one in our group said. “I ate 17 power bars yesterday, and now they want me to swallow butter?”

But it's the meditation classes and sessions that really make the week at Chopra worth it. “If you take away only one thing,” repeat a series of instructors, “make it meditation.” Working with the Dalai Lama, scientists have found that the brain chemistry of longtime meditators is different from that of those who don't meditate. For one thing, electrode maps show a significantly increased capacity for

Before arriving at the Chopra Center, I'm to start a cleansing diet—no salt, sugar, caffeine, alcohol, or meat

kindness. While the cortisol and the adrenaline-releasing fight-or-flight response provoked by stress leads to disease, the deep relaxation of routine meditation can help counteract aggravation and its side effects. In a resurrected Vedic tradition, we all get our own mantra, said to be the sound the earth was making when we were born. (Apparently the ancients recorded such things, and the Chopra folks plug birth dates into a computer program to access the info.)

During the meditations, in the reverent quiet shared by strangers, the infinite human potential that forms the crux of Chopra teachings feels like a reality. During these half-hour sessions there's a palpable sense that regardless of the tattered psyches which brought us here, the future is now bright with possibility. Now, that's a significant souvenir to pack up and take home. □

practitioner to connect with the spirit and diagnose energy blockages followed by a rhythmic full-body massage.

The Benefits Practitioners believe that lomilomi improves circulation, balances the mind and emotions, speeds healing, and pro-



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motes the elimination of lactic acid and other wastes.

The Places The Big Island's Fairmont Orchid is surrounded by five mountains held sacred in Hawaiian tradition. Therapists at its spa offer lomilomi treatments based on traditional methods (800-441-1414; fairmont.com; doubles, \$450-\$919; 50-minute lomilomi massage, \$159-\$179).

INDIA

Dating as far back as 1000 B.C., Ayurveda, India's traditional system of medicine uses diet, yoga, plant-based medicines, and body treatments to promote wellness.

The Treatment An even stream of lukewarm herb-infused oil is poured onto the forehead for an hour to bring neurological functions into balance, and an enema of herbs, salt, honey, and oil is said



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to restore immunity.

The Benefits Believed to effectively treat maladies ranging from insomnia to impotence.

The Places You'll have to commit at least two weeks, but Kalarikovilakom—set in a nineteenth-century palace in Kerala—offers treatments steeped in tradition, and its Ayurvedic physicians have trained at India's most prestigious schools (91-4923 263737; kalarikovilakom.com; doubles, \$10,390-\$23,432 for two weeks, all-inclusive). □

27%
OF WORKERS SAY THEY
PLAN TO WORK WHILE ON
VACATION THIS YEAR

