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Ever tried lateral thinking in a canoe? On the Big Stretch life-coaching course in Spain, Lisa Johnson discovered the creative potential of landscape



'ISN'T IT LIKE going for a walk with your shrink?' asked one friend when I told her I'd signed up for The Big Stretch, a residential life-coaching course in northern Spain.

Well, yes, but only to a point. For one thing, a week of life coaching, hiking, canoeing and drinking cider must surely compare favourably to any session on a psychotherapist's couch. And, for another, the focus is different.

Put crudely, while therapy tends to look back at unresolved issues, life coaching looks forward, with a view to taking action. How and why you got here is less important than how you're going to get where you want to be. For me, that practical focus made a difference. I had tried therapy following a painful break-up and, while it had given me some insights, it hadn't made me feel much better. The Big Stretch, however, had a

magical effect on my spirits. Perhaps it was the fairytale setting – mists drifting across limestone peaks, autumn crocuses pricking through emerald-green meadows, butterscotch cows. But, afterwards, I felt as if a wand had been waved over me, turning the voice that scratched away at my self-belief into a puff of smoke and sending me into the future with a renewed sense of purpose and possibility.

The Big Stretch uses the gorgeous landscapes of Asturias – the mountainous region between Galicia and the Basque country – to apply the principles of creative thinking to individual ambitions. Based around the aptly named farmstead of La Montaña Mágica, it typically attracts achievers seeking more fulfilling lives, giving them an opportunity to step back, get a broader perspective and take a new direction. The process is playful and exploratory, involving notebooks, crayons, quotations,

diagrams, visualisations, future projections and group brainstorming sessions. It also encourages participants to think big.

The woman wielding the wand is Rosie Walford, a psychology graduate with extensive professional experience in strategic planning and creative problem-solving. She came up with the idea for The Big Stretch following a revelatory encounter in a New Zealand gorge, when she used the surrounding landscape to help a Swedish engineer who was feeling directionless.

'I asked him to describe the gorge and how it had been formed – the depths invisible below the water, the ice carving its way through,' she says. 'And then I used lateral-thinking techniques to look at the engineer's own strengths. The exercise made him realise his invisible depths. And it made me realise that nature is an endless source of analogy.'

Wishful thinking

Together with fellow life coach Andrew Woodgate, she has, this week, the challenge of inspiring a group of seven women and one



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man, aged 33 to 59. Some of our issues are professional, while others, such as a mother of two disabled teenage boys who wants to move on from a divorce, are more personal. For me, a freelance writer keen to move into other areas, it's a desire to write a children's book. I am also after a better 'work/life balance': I tend to become so enthused by and absorbed in work that other areas, such as health and socialising, get sidelined.

The week begins with us identifying our values. Rosie asks us to recall a situation in which we had felt uncomfortable, and identify which personal lines had been crossed. I remember feeling guilty after writing excitedly about Las Vegas, when, as a committed environmentalist, I'd also been appalled by the animal attractions and unbridled consumerism of the place.

Our next focus is what Rosie and Andrew call 'wishful thinking' – using a 'wheel of life' to picture our hopes for our families, relationships, career, contribution to the world and so on. We are asked to imagine ourselves at our 70th birthday party, listening to a colleague, a friend and a family member tell those assembled why they love us. I don't think I am alone in thinking 'God! If I want to be remembered as that (a gracious and hilarious hostess, and a generous and inspiring friend), and not as that (someone who still bangs on about work), I'd better do something about it.' Rosie then gets us to choose a couple of magazine images from a zillion spread out on the floor, and explain why we have picked them. 'This is what's missing from my life,' I announce, brandishing a picture of a male model holding a baby. 'What, a six-pack!' giggles the woman sitting opposite me. But it is the

tenderness of the relationship that appeals to me most.

Outside the coaching sessions, the other components of the week are equally impressive. Each morning, we all partake in sunrise sessions of Tai Chi – cowbells clanking all around us – and, in the afternoon, we enjoy delicious picnics of tortilla, *jamón* and chocolate, provided by our preposterously good-looking guide Diego. My favourite dinners take place at rustic *siderrias*, where waiters pour cider into our glasses from a great height. It may be the course's insistence on big rather than small talk, or the vast quantities of wine and cider that are consumed, but by the fourth night, when we are sent off to dinner without the coaches, we find ourselves cackling like a busload of children.

New challenges

The hikes are wonderful. They take us past colourful clumps of heather and gorse, down woodland paths scattered with chestnut husks and furry caterpillars, and through the famous Cares Gorge, where sunlight glances off the rocks into the sparkling river. But the clever part is that the walks aren't just a complement to the mental stretching, they are part of it.

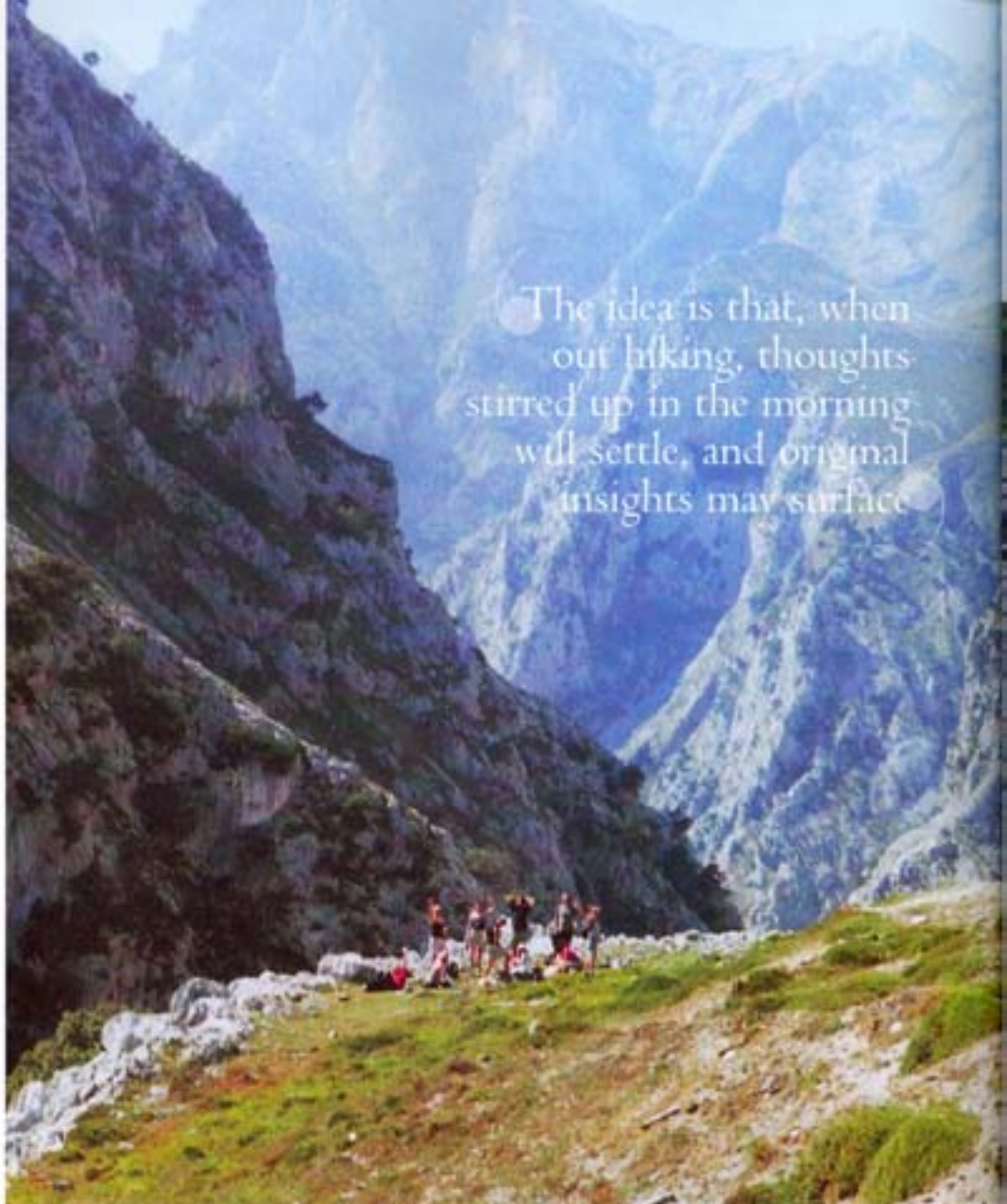
Before we set off, Rosie talks about different brain states, and how repetitive activity in nature can induce the Alpha state, offering access to the subconscious. Her idea is that when we are out hiking, thoughts stirred up in the morning will settle, and original insights and ideas may surface. I don't recall experiencing any epiphanies while walking, but something interesting happens when Andrew tells us to let ourselves be drawn to something in the landscape. I stop before a view that takes in both the dramatic Picos de Europa mountains and a simple

stone house in a sunlit meadow. To me it embodies danger and serenity – or, in my own life, adventure and homecomings, the thick of the city and the remote countryside, full-on weekends and low-key weeks. The next day, without thinking, I reproduce the same scene in my notebook. What I have done, I think, is anchor something fundamental – a love of extremes and a need for balance – in my visual memory.

A day devoted to canoeing and lateral thinking is equally enlightening. The coaches encourage us to use the activity in several ways, one of them being an opportunity to note how we react to new challenges. I am generally quite sporty and a bit of a perfectionist, so when

my canoeing companion and I get wedged on the rapids, I initially feel frustration, failure and panic at the prospect of obstructing others; but it is great fun getting unstuck and the others (clearly) find it hilarious. Ditto when we ground ourselves in the shallows, and I get out and fall flat on my back. It isn't the first time my Mr Bean tendencies, rather than my attempts at poise and polish, have endeared me to others. The same thing happened recently when I was complimenting a fashionable colleague on her elegant outfit and walked smack into a lamppost.

Having identified our values and wishes, we are given one-on-one coaching sessions to identify our central ambitions (in my case,

A photograph of a group of hikers on a mountain trail. The hikers are in the lower middle ground, appearing as small figures against the vast landscape. The background features steep, rocky mountain slopes and a valley. The sky is clear and blue. Overlaid on the right side of the image is a large, white, serif text block.

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Above: the group on a hike in the Cares Gorge. Opposite, from left: La Montaña Mágica farmhouse, the base for The Big Stretch; Lisa (far left) with the rest of the group on their day of canoeing



TRAVEL NOTES

A week on The Big Stretch (www.thebigstretch.com) costs £2,350 per person. Sessions in 2007 begin on 20 May, 17 June, 22 September, and 6 and 14 October. For more information, contact Pura Aventura (0845 225 5058; www.pura-aventura.com).

writing the next Harry Potter) and find out what is getting in the way. I start to address my negative inner voice, which tells me I'm useless the minute I'm thwarted – sensitive psychological territory that Rosie and I negotiate as we walk along a disturbingly narrow path through the Cares Gorge. Here, Rosie gives me a tool for preventing the downward spiral (asking whether the things I tell myself are true or false, and then identifying what's true), then suggests I might like to throw something into the gorge. 'I think I'll just chuck in the witch,' I say, realising that by giving my sinister inner voice a comic identity, I've robbed it of much of its power.

My other big block is an overwhelming feeling of sadness when I'm reminded of past boyfriends, and the lives I've lost with them. Sitting in the garden at the hotel, Rosie asks me to measure this loss against what I've gained: a sense of perspective; a more positive and generous approach; a greater degree of self-knowledge. And she guides me on a visualisation, encouraging me to breathe through the negative emotions and feel them



changing shape. It works. For the first time, I really feel how valuable that knowledge will be, particularly to my next relationship.

Commitment to change

We have all been on trips that have introduced us to new habits, only to slip straight back into the old, bad ones on our return. But if you invest £2,000 in a life-changing holiday, you won't want this to happen, and The Big Stretch makes every effort to ensure it doesn't. The week ends with two days of action-planning and anchoring commitment to change: Rosie asks us to schedule in 'accountability appointments', plan treats when commitments are honoured and, potentially, continue the coaching process from home. I have already put a notebook next to my bed to record my dreams, read two excellent books on creative thinking, written a little children's story about an Easter egg hunt for my four-year-old niece and rewarded myself with three new frocks.

By the end of the trip, I find myself seeing symbolism in everything, so my 39th birthday, which falls on the final day, feels deeply significant. It is a magical day in

itself, with a coastal walk to a deserted sandy cove, a swim in the sea, and a running race and bottle of champagne on the beach. There is a lot to be said for removing yourself from your everyday surroundings – in my case, South London – and reviewing your life in a place of beauty. The pristine environment acts like a clean sheet, encouraging you to start afresh; and breathing in lungfuls of mountain and sea air has a similarly renewing effect. Things look very different – clearer and more simple – from a mountain peak suffused in sunshine than from a desk littered with coffee cups and computer paraphernalia.

On top of that, I feel incredibly lucky to have shared the experience with those people at such a crucial time of my life. Exactly a year before, I left a staff job on a magazine to become a freelance writer. What The Big Stretch did was to convince me I had made the right decision, despite the inherent emotional and financial challenges; and to have the courage and confidence to push myself forward more, and complete a first draft of my children's tale. If the witch is trying to clamber back up the gorge, she's got a hell of a long way to climb. ■