



peak perception

In search of some big answers, James Henderson heads off into the Spanish hills to learn how to broaden his mind.

It's easy to forget, awash in a complicated and demanding life, how good it feels to do something healthy and simple. I am walking and thinking in the Picos de Europa in northern Spain, along a magnificent gorge soaring with ragged limestone peaks. As always, I am whistling, to the rhythm of my feet, a happy tune. Or at least, Talking Heads' song *Once in a Lifetime*: "And you may find yourself/Living in a shotgun shack/In another part of the world."

It's curiously apt, because there is an element of finding yourself on this trip. This is the Big Stretch, a new hybrid of "life coaching" and creative thinking. Life coaching was a hazy concept to me before I signed up. I joked that I might return wanting a job in a suit. Well, er, possibly. But utter the words and a surprising number of people know what you're talking about. The idea behind the Big Stretch is that once you have settled on a question or an issue – you might have an unarticulated dream, or perhaps you can feel a change coming without knowing quite what it is – the creative thinking can help you to put it into action or think your way out of the rut.

"We ask some pretty big, open questions," says Rosie Walford, the company's creator, "and help people clarify their sense of direction." An experimental psychologist, Walford has been an advertising strategist and a specialist in creative problem-solving. Her experience in travel – as a writer, photographer and expedition leader – gave her the idea to set the Big Stretch abroad, with all the advantages of the different perspective that travel brings.

You have to be up for it. And as someone apt to get the giggles in a crowd of people openly emoting, I was relieved to find there was no chanting or holding hands. Nor is the Big Stretch therapy or

counselling (as such it is not suitable for the psychologically fragile). It is hard exercise for the mind, and some for the legs, rather than salve for the spirit. Importantly, the creative thinking skills learnt can be applied to other areas of life.

Besides myself, there were five women – an American, a Canadian and three Englishwomen – in their 30s and 40s. One was an MD, one was in the arts, one in IT, one was spookily like an ex-girlfriend... all very different. Some had an issue already in mind, others were there to tease out a general dissonance in life. Our daily routine consisted of a morning "session" with group exercises, followed by a walk to incubate ideas, with the two coaches shifting back and forth among the group to help stimulate thoughts. After another group gathering back at the hotel (quite simple but perfectly comfortable and in a wonderful setting), we went out and ate well (and inexpensively) in local restaurants.

The whole procedure divides neatly into three sections, each of two days. First, as the clutter of daily life subsided in the face of the fantastic views and holiday time, we looked at our basic values and homed in on an issue. It is very personal (and confidential within the group), so we got to know one another quickly. Two key themes were "taking time back from work" and "general confidence", but there was an admirable simplicity in one woman's quest, "to grow into herself".

But what's a fellow with a weird and wonderful job trav-

elling around the world and writing about it supposed to think about for a week? Eventually, I decided to think through bringing up my children. Given a week, what parent wouldn't?

Next, we used creative thinking processes to stimulate a fresh approach. The exercises pinned the issue down, dissected and reconstructed it, threw it up in the air, set it aside and came back to it from a tangent. Then we took our "issues" off into the hills to mull over. It's easy to go a little stir-crazy among the cascade of thoughts and ideas and to see all sorts of illusory analogies. Mine was water. (That song again: "Under the rocks and stones/Water flowing underground"). But on the third day, in the Cares Gorge, on a meandering path cut into hillsides and cliffs, ideal for rumination, I could feel it fall into place. The ideas came flooding out.

Interestingly, the whole process is underpinned by psychology. It turns out that the repetitive action of walking assists thinking because it can put

your mind into an "alpha" state – between the active working brain state, "beta", and the subconsciousness of dreams, "theta". Many sorts of motion have the same effect, such as train and car journeys. In alpha state the brain rejigs disparate information and releases thoughts that might otherwise remain blocked.

Next day we climbed to several thousand feet in a massive ravine littered with boulders and scree. Not a single thing grew. We zig-zagged uphill, stamping footholds into the snow, our hard breathing crumpling the happy lyrics: "Into the blue again". On a rest, the only straight thing in view was an aircraft vapour trail. A distant capsule of clutter, a reminder that we would soon be on the way home.

The last two days were spent creating a workable plan that we would enjoy putting in place (for me this included making sail boats and pre-empting snags like smoking, drugs and sex), finding people and resources to help us to do so, and setting timings.

No doubt, once in a while, everybody should ask themselves the questions that life coaches put to you. The system of the Big Stretch helps you decide what to do about your issues and then take the

answers home. So, if you find yourself surrounded with all the things you thought you'd ever want – the career and the car, perhaps, or in my case Talking Heads' "A beautiful house, with a beautiful wife" – but are still somehow adrift, the Big Stretch might guide you to calmer waters and anchor the dreams. ♦

The Big Stretch (www.thebigstretch.com) offers one-week courses in the Picos de Europa in October 2003 and from June 2004 for £1,580 full board, excluding flights. Call Pura Aventura (01273-676712, www.pura-aventura.com) for details.



Above: exercising mind and body – high meadow-walking in the Bulnes region. Below: La Montana Magica hotel.