

Stretching horizons

Feeling unfulfilled? **FIONA MACLEOD** goes on a refreshing life-coaching course in Spain's mountains

My mind was racing as I stood under the giant awning that covers the outside concourse at Bilbao airport. Meeting a group of strangers with whom you are about to spend a week is bound to be an event tinged with apprehension, particularly when much of the holiday agenda is to share your innermost thoughts and feelings.

I was one of a small group that had signed up to exercise both mind and body in the Picos de Europa mountains in northern Spain, accompanied by an expert guide and two life coaches.

"The Big Stretch" was conceived by Rosie Walford, a psychologist who has specialised in creative thinking, working with large organisations around the world to improve innovation and strategic planning. "While working with organisations like Comic Relief, the BBC and Unilever," Rosie said, "I found during the individual sessions people often chose to look beyond the work environment to the more personal aspects of their lives and this extra dimension appealed to me."

Rosie has teamed up with the travel company Pura Aventura, which specialises in Spanish walking holidays, to devise a trip that combines physical activity, exceptional natural beauty and life-coaching. "The exercise and the scenery frees the mind to view one's life from a different perspective." Our mountain guide was one of the founders of Pura, Diego Martin, who now lives in Asturias, one of the three regions dominated by the craggy splendour of the Picos de Europa.

Diego met us at the airport and we set off along the coast, stopping for lunch in the village of Puertas. Here we sat at

a long trestle table in a cobbled courtyard drinking Rioja and eating octopus with onion and piquant grilled prawns that tasted particularly delicious in the mountain air. Conversation was animated as we began to find out why we had joined "The Big Stretch".

Most of us had heard about it through personal recommendations but the Canadian in our midst had stumbled across the website when looking up the timetable for "The Big Stretch", her Toronto yoga class. Generally, we had quite unformed ideas about what we wanted to tackle but all of us had a nagging sense that we weren't tapping our full potential. Every member of the group had a good job and was intelligent and dynamic but wanted to explore new ideas and ways of looking at things.

There was some preliminary homework which I'd found constructive and revealing. We were to look at the core elements of life including career, finances and family to assess how fulfilled we felt in each area. We were also to write something about the sources of frustration and happiness in our everyday existence. I'd approached these tasks with both curiosity and a touch of scepticism but was amazed at how my mind was clarified by using the simple techniques they had provided.

From these beginnings we began to examine in more detail what made us tick. Various exercises helped to identify our fundamental values and aspirations. We wrote down an achievement of which we were proud and then had to explain why. The same process was repeated for a task which we had failed. Each time we were then asked to describe the related emotions. Another task was to look back to when we were 20 and remember what our wishes for our lives had been then. Later on we



On top of the world: climbing the Picos mountains is one of the challenges that guests tackle on 'The Big Stretch'

looked forwards to our funeral to consider what we would want people to say about us.

Our main coaching sessions took place every morning in the cosy sitting room of our mountainside chalet hotel La Montana Magica. We had an open fire that we lit when it was chilly. My bedroom was in the attic, with windows facing on to a view of the Picos, a row of irregular, jagged, limestone peaks.

Before lunch we would set off for the daily activity, usually walking but on one occasion it was a canoeing expedition on the river Sella. We walked to Llosa de Viango (Horse's Valley) among the gentle slopes of the Sierra del Cuera that runs between the coastline and the more dramatic mountains of the Picos. Bells on the necks of the livestock that graze there unrestricted rang out all round us in a trance-inducing rhythm. Ruined

stone huts littered the landscape. In times past, shepherds would have lived in these buildings for the summer months when they moved up to the lush grazing on the high ground. There they would make cheese from the rich summer milk which was then matured in the caves that abound here.

On another walk, having graduated to the steeper slopes of the Picos, we encountered a shepherd and his wife in the Pandebano Pass who still followed this seasonal tradition. In a tiny one-roomed building about four metres square they slept, cooked and made cheese. The interior was completely blackened by the smoke used to cure the cheese that lay on the wooden rafters. To supplement the picnic brought for us by Diego we bought a piece of cheese and followed the wiry little shepherd up towards Naranjo de Bulnes, the highest peak in

the middle massif of the Picos. We lunched on a grassy patch with a spectacular view of this awesome mountain while fending off a band of goats, intent on sharing our food.

From on high we looked down to the tiny village of Bulnes against the side of the steep valley below and were asked to imagine how our lives might look if viewed from this distance. As the week progressed we structured the information we had gathered about ourselves and on our final day we had to complete a detailed action plan for achieving the goals we had set ourselves, prompted by questions from Rosie.

As a team we had all worked well together. Everyone had opened up and contributed freely which I am sure had much to do with the way we were steered and guided by our excellent coaches. By the end of the week we

found ourselves to be a group of friends with a significant knowledge and appreciation of each other.

The experience of arriving back in London was quite different from arriving in Bilbao. It felt odd as our little band dispersed. We had been to a very beautiful place together, eaten first-rate food and taken stock. Without exception we all felt the stronger for it.

Visit the *The Big Stretch* at www.thebigstretch.com or Pura Aventura (0845 225 5058) Fiona MacLeod flew from Gatwick to Bilbao with British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) which has flights from £89. You can also fly from Stansted with easyJet (0871 750 0100; www.easyJet.com) or from Heathrow with Iberia (0845 601 2854; www.iberia.com)