



Alitude at altitude: the Picos mountains, northern Spain.

Mountains of the mind

Dan Whitaker discovers that life coaching while hiking Spain's Picos de Europa helps body and soul

There is something about mountains. The world does feel different when you are up among them in that quiet, thin air. What looked so troublesome down on the flat, inside those buildings, starts slowly to diminish towards molehill status. But it probably wouldn't work if you were helicoptered up. No, you have to pound your feet upon Mother Nature's generous shoulders to earn that new perspective.

The Big Stretch is based, as founder Rosie Walford says, 'on a hunch that ideas happen after a big walk.' It combines a week's hill-walk-

ing in the beautiful Picos de Europa range in the Asturias region of northern Spain, with sessions which Rosie describes as 'creative life planning'.

I'd never tried anything like this before, but was drawn by the efficiency of a workout for legs and mind together. That, and the sound of the luxurious lodgings and tasty Asturian cuisine which would be the reward for each day's progress on the slopes and the couch.

My five companions shared some traits. They were all urbanites, aged

between 30 and 50, successful enough in their work, but each unsettled by some question or challenge with which help, or inspiration, was wanted. All but one were now Londoners, the last an intrepid Torontian, who had found the Big Stretch website accidentally while looking for a local yoga class, but had come over anyway.

We bonded enough to make plans to meet up again in 'the world'

Rosie Walford herself and Darren Rudkin were assigned to look after us when I went for my Big Stretch in October. Both share a professional background in having taught creative thinking to companies, which then evolved into helping people with their personal lives as much as their work. In terms of their own personalities, perhaps by accident, they provide a double act that works well - whenever one waxes lyrical, the other maintains feet firmly on the ground.

Walford and Rudkin describe themselves as 'life coaches'. I interpreted that as something like an imaginary perfect elder sibling. Wise, caring and devoting their experience exclusively to your benefit. Well, this is an imaginary sibling. They

don't like the term 'therapy' because of its backward-looking connotations. This is not about why you are where you are' Rosie explains, 'but about moving forward. And you do have to be open to questioning your assumptions and habits.'

The third staffer was our mountain guide, Diego Martin, who both knows the Picos and, fortunately, how to teach his love of them to invertebrate city dwellers. A green, dramatic range reaching up to the Atlantic coast, it seems fitting that the Picos are in a part of Spain with a Celtic culture (bagpipes are traditional). Asturias proudly claims to be the only region of the country that remained Christian, holding out against the Moorish invasion in the Middle Ages. In a way, Diego turned out to be our third life coach, because the mountain walking isn't just an added bonus, it's an integral part of the process.

There turns out to be some science behind the idea that exercise can help when you are trying to resolve a problem. Medical studies show that according to what we are doing at any moment, the connections between the

purely tenth or so of our brain that is our conscious and the hulking remainder that is sub-conscious either constrict or open up.

Apparently, most of everyday life happens in a 'beta' mode, which allows multitasking but not access to the reflections and inspirations which are needed to make progress. Focusing on a repeated activity like walking, on the other hand, can put us in 'alpha' territory. Thought then becomes more lateral and that's when breakthroughs can occur. Of course you could use a treadmill back home, but getting away from your own everyday surroundings also helps if you are going to step out of the box. Hearing this made me think of Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* and its Aborigines on their 100-mile walkabouts. Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, wrote 'Above all, do not lose your desire to walk. I have walked myself into my best thoughts.'

One side of the lodge faces on to rocky crags, meadows of wildflowers and the ruins of a Roman watchtower. Guests have their own duplex apartments, with beams and furnishings carved from local chestnut

wood, in which they may rejuvenate themselves in a Jacuzzi.

The fact that this trip was such a perfect example of the upside of my work as a writer led me to drop an initial plan to focus my creative life sessions on career issues. I switched instead to that other reliable source of emotional turmoil: relationships, why they thrive or fail, and how to communicate better within them.

My sessions gradually came to focus on the completely different rules of non-written communication, ones I still hadn't mastered. Some of the work was alone, some with Rosie or Darren, and some with other group members. And it did feel like work, in the best sense: exhausting, but also cathartic with a sense of progress.

I surprised myself with how much I enjoyed this, realising some principles that must sound obvious. One was that what you get out of a relationship depends on what you put in to it, and to show initiative rather than wait for the other person to recognise what was needed. Another was that what is said isn't the same as what is meant - the danger of taking statements at face value. Finally, and hearteningly, how much people can (and want to) help each other. I could think of important times in my life when I had not observed these rules, with unfortunate consequences.

My fellow travellers' issues included how to find a way of life more focused on helping others; how to start a relationship that is mutually nurturing; and how to refresh a business partnership, which after two decades needed maintenance in the same way that any relationship would.

The sessions alternated with attempts to slip our brains into 'alpha' gear. There was a wet scramble to Diego's favourite hidden valley, sound-tracked by a cacophony of cowbells; sun-baked striding through the majestic Cares gorge, where, legend has it, the Moors

were turned back; battling with goats for the best view of the highest peak in the Picos; and a refreshing canoe capsized into modest river rapids. The physical exhaustions approached the mental ones. If I was pushing for still higher realms of luxury, a pre-dinner massage would have been my request.

We had been gaining so much from the talking that sometimes it was a frustration when we switched over and began the walking. But quickly the striding would become pleasantly hypnotic and the exhilaration of being somewhere beautiful would seep in. Try as I might, I couldn't detect any alpha thoughts and in fact could hardly focus on the sessions while up on the mountains. But when back at the hotel, things did feel like they had ordered themselves better in my mind, with what mattered most neatly flagged.

The other five also seemed to be stretching forward with their own issues. We bonded enough to make plans to meet up again back in 'the world', something I'm looking forward to with curiosity.

It's hard to apportion credit between the physical exertions, the group dynamics and the teaching and tricks of our coaches, designed to help us realise what matters most to each of us (often surprisingly hidden) and to see the familiar with new eyes. But in combination, they worked this time.

The Big Stretch is not a cheap week's holiday, at around £1,680 (good food and wine included, though not flights to Bilbao). And it's a risk - weather, companions, chemistry with your coaches are all gambles; perhaps I was lucky.

But if it all comes together, and you are open to submitting to 'creative life planning', the week can give a satisfaction not easy to come across elsewhere. Insights there should be capable of leading to positive changes once back home, though of course that's another story. It's an idea that deserves success.

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Diego the guide leads visitors into his favourite valleys.

Factfile



A week's holiday with The Big Stretch (01273 67 6712; www.thebigstretch.com) costs £1,580 per person for all meals, including a la carte dinners with wine, a single en suite room, coaching, guiding, transfers, excursions and canoe hire. After your holiday, you can pay an extra £500 for six one-hour 'Keep on Stretching' post-trip life coaching sessions which are conducted via telephone. Places remain for three 2004 sessions which run 15-22 May, 10 July and 11-18 September.

British Airways offers a daily flight from Heathrow (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) to Bilbao for £84.90 including tax and charges. EasyJet (0871 750 0100; www.easyjet.com) has a daily flight from Gatwick and one from Bristol direct to Bilbao, and twice daily flights from Stansted; all prices start at £30.98 return. The Big Stretch staff will collect you from Bilbao airport.



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