

## How to Turn Your Next Trip Into a Self-Care Vacation

Vacationing with a purpose—to celebrate running a half marathon or to recover from a breakup—will energize and inspire you.

By Pam O'Brien | Aug 22, 2017

Topics: [healthy travel](#), [self care](#), [mental health](#)



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There are vacations you take to sightsee and those you plan around a favorite activity, like surfing. They're loads of fun, for sure. But the trips that will really have an impact on you and change you in lasting ways are the ones you take for a specific purpose. Known as intentional travel, these are the getaways that help you heal from something sad—a job loss, a relationship ending—or celebrate an accomplishment like a promotion or a milestone birthday. "Think of them as self-care vacations: They offer the opportunity to nurture *you*," says Jaime Kurtz, Ph.D., and associate professor of psychology at James Madison University and the author of *The Happy Traveler: Unpacking the Secrets of Better Vacations*. "They let you stop, catch your breath, relax, and really look inward." (Here's [how to make time for self-care](#) IRL too.)

Because they provide an emotional payoff that your average vacay just doesn't deliver, intentional trips can be incredibly powerful. "They give us the time to really think about things in a way we can't in our busy everyday lives, so that we can put what happened in perspective," Kurtz says. That, in turn, can act as a catalyst to help us move in new directions. "By giving you the space you need to problem-solve, intentional trips help you make big decisions about things you want to change in your life," says Sally Fisher, M.D., an assistant clinical professor at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine and the medical director at Sunrise Springs Spa Resort in Santa Fe. (BTW, here's [how to use your vacation to \\*actually\\* relax](#).)

No wonder, then, that purpose-driven getaways are becoming more popular. They're considered a type of wellness tourism, which is growing about 50 percent faster than general tourism, according to a report from the Global Wellness Institute. "People are searching for more meaning in their lives, and these trips can help them find it," Dr. Fisher says.

Ready for a little enlightened travel of your own? These three guidelines will help you pick the best mind-boosting getaway.

### 1. Know what your endgame is.

First and foremost, figure out what you want to get out of your trip. For instance, if you're between jobs, are you looking for a way to boost your spirits and self-esteem? Or are you hoping to brainstorm new opportunities? Celebrating a big birthday may be a moment to commemorate and reflect. Don't be afraid to aim high with your goals: "Travel makes the mind more expansive, research shows, so that you can think about your situation in new ways, rather than being caught in the same mental loop that you find yourself in at home," Dr. Fisher says.

Once you've settled on your objectives, you can start considering destinations, Kurtz says. Being specific about what you want to achieve is instrumental to making the right choice: A spa or a retreat where you can take classes, be pampered, and do meditation might be the best fit if you're after self-reflection, while an adventurous rock climbing or mountain biking trip that gets your adrenaline going could release a flood of creative ideas.

### 2. Embrace the unknown.

An intentional trip with activities that push you out of your comfort zone and require your mind and body to be fully engaged will make you feel reenergized. Case in point: learning a new skill, like sailing, which demands your complete attention and is mentally and physically invigorating.

"Nothing puts fresh perspective on your life like stepping out of it for a while and doing something completely new," Dr. Fisher says. "You'll start to think differently and come up with solutions to problems you never would have thought of before."

You'll also feel a sense of pride for conquering a challenge. This is especially important if you've just gone through a negative experience like a breakup, Kurtz says. Instead of lying on a beach and ruminating about what went wrong, do something fun and active that will boost your confidence and make you feel in charge. (Check out these [7 adventure vacations](#).)

### 3. Get back to nature.

Spend time outdoors, and within minutes you'll feel happier and more relaxed. "Studies show that being in nature lowers the stress hormone cortisol and improves your mood," says Dr. Fisher, who advises the guests she works with at Sunrise Springs to take trail walks or practice outdoor yoga. (See: [Science-backed ways that getting in touch with nature boosts your health](#).)

The beauty of nature can even evoke feelings of awe or wonder in us that boost our physical and mental health, according to a study at the University of California, Berkeley. Awe is associated with lower levels of inflammation-producing proteins in our bodies called cytokines, the researchers say. As a result, our immune systems become stronger and our emotions grow more positive.

Take advantage of this natural healing by booking a trip to a spectacular location—the Grand Canyon or Hawaii, say—then double the benefits by being active. Just like nature, exercise reduces stress, heightens mood, and builds immunity. So go on a long trail run, hike through a forest, or snorkel in the ocean. "You'll feel rejuvenated and be inspired to get out of the rut you might be in," Dr. Fisher says. "Intentional travel takes you to another place, literally and figuratively."