

A Transformational Journey at Esalen

The highway toward Route 101 out of Los Angeles was flooded with cars and I drove at a glacial pace, yet instead of feeling frustrated, I was smiling. In fact, I had been smiling ever since I got into my car an hour ago, gleeful at being alone. Writer Insiya Rasiwala-Finn

If you are a mother of a young child, you may sympathize. I have a two-year old son and I had not experienced a day or a night off from being with him since he was in my belly. My moments of quietness were snatches, stolen in between naps and after bedtime, swallowed up by life's mundanities, unending to-do lists and the effort to achieve a greater level of efficiency than I had ever experienced in my pre-baby life.

My husband travelled often, but I was my son's constant, the parent who was always there, and of late I had been feeling dim, as though part of my inner light was fading. It was not just a question of identity, the dissonance of being unsure of who I was; was I a mother, who wrote in snatches while her baby napped; a yogini whose practice had dwindled into all too brief twenty minute sessions; and a woman who was so tired, with trying to keep it all together that I



had forgotten what it was like to have fun? I didn't recognise myself, but I did know this: it was time for an intervention.

I decided to sign up for a writing retreat at Esalen Retreat Centre, in Big Sur, California. It would be my solo weekend, both a chance to immerse myself deeper into the craft of writing, as well as to experience some serious R & R.

Esalen has long occupied a mythic place in my reality. Founded in 1962, by two Stanford University graduates, Richard Price and Michael Murphy, Esalen became a mecca for the 'human potential movement', which believes that through the development of 'human potential' we experience an exceptional quality of life filled with happiness, creativity, and fulfillment.

Esalen is fabled for its hot spring baths overlooking the wild Pacific Ocean, delicious, healthy food, and it also happens



to be the birthplace of Esalen massage, a body work system known for its revitalising, therapeutic benefits that transcend the physical, which were also part of its appeal.

It was time to go on a trip. Only, it took a while getting there.

I drove for three-and-a-half hours on Thursday night before stopping in San Luis Obispo (SLO), and staying the night at friends. I slept fitfully, wondering how my son was sleeping, whether my husband fed him his dinner on schedule and whether he was missing me.

DAY 1

When morning came, so did a light spring rain. A deep breath, a shower, a mason jar of green juice and freshly milled porridge, courtesy of my yogi friends, and off I drove toward Highway 1, in search of the open skies of Big Sur.

Esalen's allure lies in its remoteness. 100 miles north of San Luis Obispo, 150 miles south of San Francisco, it is perched on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, on one of the westernmost reaches of North America. If you dislike driving it is an arduous

OPENING PAGE: Java Red restaurant and sweeping views of the surrounding volcanoes. THIS PAGE: The hammam, one of MesaStila's trademarks. OPPOSITE PAGE: The main pool, where you can watch fireflies dance above the water; Breathtaking view from the veranda at Ambar Villa

Esalen Makes History

More than a retreat centre or an educational institution, Esalen's beautiful 120-acre cliff-side property rises above the crashing waves of the Big Sur coastline like a beacon of light. Over the past 50 years it has attracted a unique tribe of thinkers and visionaries, amongst them the philosopher Alan Watts, writer Aldous Huxley, renowned psychologist Abraham Maslow and even folk singer Joan Baez, who lived at Esalen in its early years.

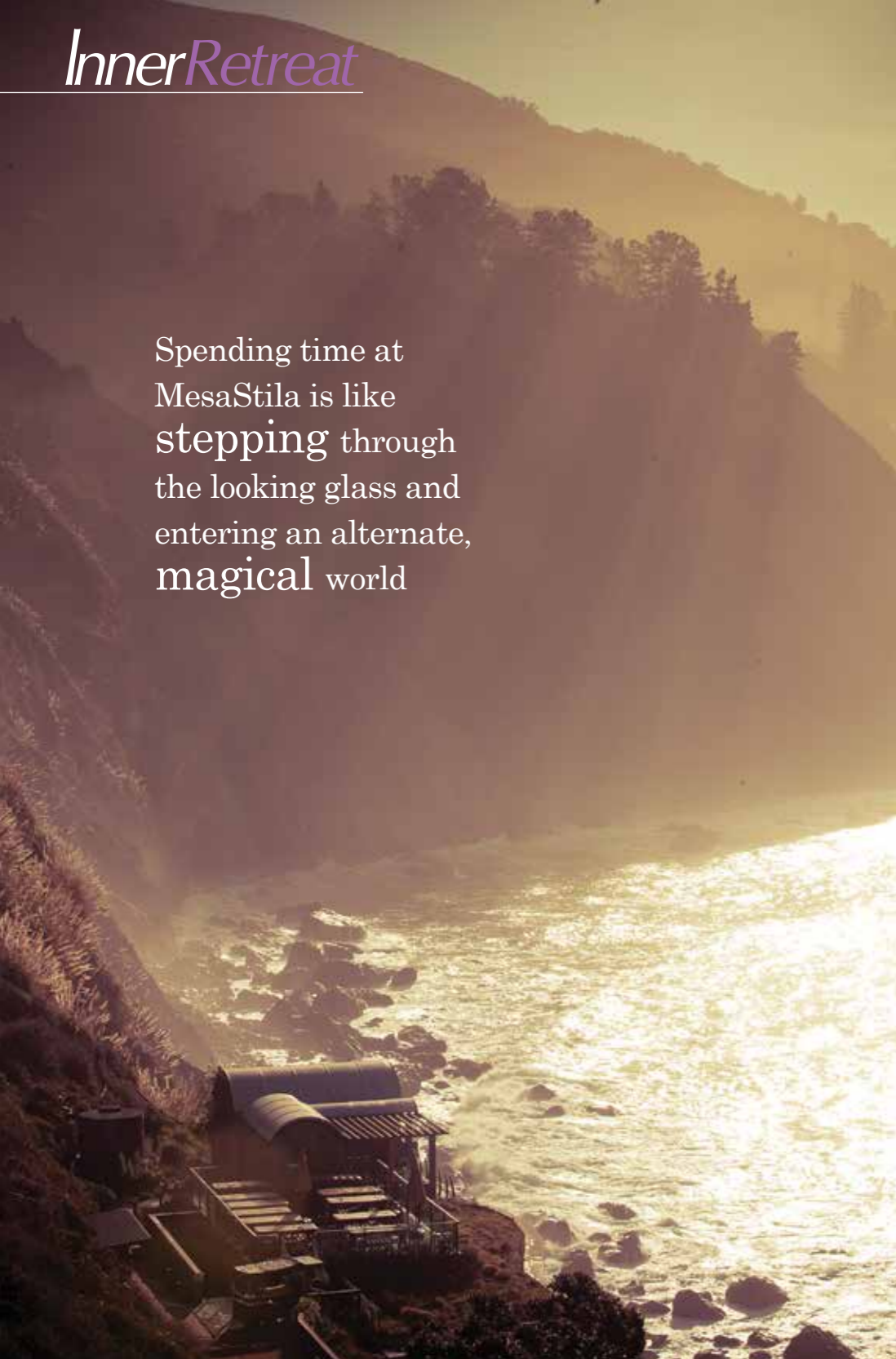
Founded in 1962, by two Stanford University graduates, Richard Price and Michael Murphy, who named it Esalen after the Esselens, a Native American tribe who originally resided on the land, Esalen became the cradle of modern Gestalt Therapy, after psychologist Fritz Perls arrived at Esalen in 1964. Gestalt was the first school of psychology that established scientifically that our perception and our understanding of the world is an active, constructive process, deeply conditioned by emotion, expectation, embodiment, relationships and culture. It also pioneered our contemporary understanding that 'mind, heart, body, spirit and relationship'

are inseparable dimensions of our human experience and evolve (or remain arrested) together. Around the same time, Esalen also hosted Dr Ida Rolf, the founder of Rolfing, who developed and taught her revolutionary and powerful method of body restructuring and realignment here.

The list goes on. Philosopher Joseph Campbell of the often mentioned 'follow your bliss' quote inspired and was inspired by Esalen. Dancer Gabrielle Roth honed her 5 Rhythms school of dance on the wood floors of Esalen's movement spaces, while Joel Kramer, the original yoga teacher at Esalen and one of North America's first well known yoga teachers in the 60s, penned a book called The Guru Papers, based on his experience while at Esalen, which admonished practitioners not to give away your personal power to your teacher or guru when following a spiritual practice (such as yoga).

Today, Esalen continues to be a crucible known for pushing cultural, intellectual and spiritual boundaries, one that transforms itself with every new age.

Spending time at MesaStila is like stepping through the looking glass and entering an alternate, magical world



journey, but if you do, it is an unforgettable drive. There are a few straight stretches, everywhere else, it is one turn after another, a hairpin bend here, then another, as far as the eye can see.

Morning light illuminated the coast's razor sharp beauty. First there was Morro Bay, a town that sits with clapboard houses facing clean lines of surfer dotted waves, then a stretch of beach inhabited by families of braying sea lions. Next, a

vista of empty beaches; rocky coastlines and gnarled trees shaped by the prevailing wind. More turns, more miles, glimpses of the blue grey February ocean, nothing to punctuate its vastness, only a few clouds in the sky. Thunderstorms cleared up as I drove through them until finally, a sign for Cabrillo Highway 1, Big Sur. I was almost there.

Esalen, read the sign. Visitors welcome. "You are early," said the woman at the gate. "You cannot check into your room

until 2pm."

Despite the lukewarm welcome, I decided to enjoy my 'early' arrival with lunch and a walk around the property. It was a simple meal, a feast of fresh organic salads, whole grains and fresh fruit. I sat alone on the outdoor patio, warmed by the sun, yet cooled by the Pacific breeze, and I ate slowly, watching the waves hit the cliffs below the winding road, on which I had just driven, and feeling a visceral sense of having accomplished something monumental.

It was time to explore. I walked down a path leading past the dining hall, toward the cliff and stood at the edge of the ocean. The ocean is everywhere at Esalen. You can hear its seething sound when the tide is high, you feel its expansive backdrop and you are mesmerised by its wildness.

A few hundred metres from the cliff edge is part of Esalen's four-acre farm. Cultivated following the principles of organic and biodynamic agriculture, the farm produces a large part of the produce that feeds the nearly 250 to 350 people that eat at Esalen each day. In February it was dotted with colourful kale, chard, cabbage, carrots and fennel.

I crossed a bridge toward the other side of the property and found a circular meditation hut, sitting atop a gully. No one was inside, so I sat there for a few moments, gulping in breaths of fresh ocean air and feeling my mind starting to relax.

Finally, it was time to check into my room. While booking my stay, I had requested a room to myself, but since I had not paid the single room surcharge, it was not a guarantee. I was hopeful, but as it turned out, it was not to be. As I unlocked the door to my room, I noticed a suitcase open with clothing, books and various other objects spilling out of it. There were half-eaten organic chocolate bars on one bed and some long dresses hanging in the closet.

There was no time to contemplate who my mystery roommate was. A hatha yoga class was about to begin and I wanted to make it. I showered, changed and walked up to the yoga studio, high up on the cliff behind the dining hall. We faced the ocean as we practised and it took focus to listen

THIS PAGE: Pencak Silat is Indonesia's own martial art form; Drying coffee beans from the resort's plantation. OPPOSITE PAGE: The spa lounge is a beautiful spot to relax and unwind

to the teacher's soft commands amidst that stunning view.

The hour sped by and the sky outside was dark when we were summoned by a dinner bell. The dining room was packed to its wood beamed rafters, and buzzed with the conversation and laughter of at least 300 people. One of them was my, as yet, unknown roommate. There was the salad bar with freshly picked farm greens, a vegetarian main course, as well as roast meat, fish and a soup. It was simple, wholesome and tasty, and I felt a little bit as though I was at a summer camp, albeit for conscious adults as I slid my tray through



the cafeteria-style line-up.

At the orientation, JJ Jeffries, a long time resident and volunteer at Esalen, enlightened first-time visitors about Esalen's history and culture. In particular, he spoke about etiquette at the baths. "The baths are clothing optional," he said and described the importance of nudity here as a symbol of our universal commonality, of the freedom of shedding the masks we create around ourselves.

I wasn't sure exactly how I felt about the communal changing rooms in the bathhouse, or being nude in a tub with strangers, but 'freedom' felt like the theme of my weekend.

"We are here," said famed poet Ellen Bass, our writing teacher, "to admire the admirable." We sat in our classroom, our group of about 20 students of all ages and demographics. She set up the weekend. There would be writing exercises, following prompts that Ellen would offer and then if we chose to, we could share our work with the group. We were to comment only on what was great about the writing – an ideal suggestion, as it eased the pressure inherent in sharing your work with complete strangers.

We introduced ourselves. It turned out that there was another first-time mother also on 'retreat' from her young son. We became immediate friends, swapping pictures of our little ones, as well as sighing with relief at how good it felt to be away.



The baths beckoned many of my classmates after class, but a few steps away was my room, and as my pillow hit my head I was already half asleep. I imagined my roommate and I would meet in the morning.

DAY 2

I awoke before the sun and decided to soak up some writing inspiration at the baths, before anyone else got there. I walked in the darkness, shivering in the damp air toward the baths at the north end of the property. There were a few other early risers, including a lady from my writing workshop. We smiled, stripped down and then covering myself with a towel I walked to a stone rimmed tub at the ocean's edge and slipped in. The water was not as hot as I had expected, which was a relief. I sat, faced the water and looked out onto the horizon. The air was still, the sky turned from dark to light and morning suddenly arrived. There is something about being in water that I find allows you to feel a sense of place. It had taken me a night, but I finally felt that I had arrived.

At 7:30am there was a vinyasa flow class taught by a peppy instructor. Breakfast followed, warm whole grains with delicious stewed fruits, granola, boiled eggs and tea, ideal for this cold February morning; then a brisk walk to class.

My writing muscles were tired from disuse, my nerves on edge, yet somehow I wrote a poem that I shared with the class. I titled it 'Weaning', which was what I

THIS PAGE: Panoramic view of the Club House and garden; A peaceful meditation, enveloped in nature



was going through right then, the process of stopping breastfeeding. My son was a voracious feeder and didn't show any signs of wanting to stop, yet I felt that I was done. Everyone I spoke to usually only offered advice. The poem became a way for me to express my feelings and to shed. In a sense, I was uncovering my own truth.

In the afternoon we wrote some more, and that night after a convivial dinner with my classmates, I walked back to the baths, this time to get a massage. Susan, my therapist said I could go and have a soak before it was time. Perhaps it was the darkness, perhaps I was more comfortable, but somehow it didn't seem to matter whether I was nude or clothed. I immersed myself into a tub and waited.

When it was time, I followed Susan into a private room. There were four massage tables inside, three of which were already taken. The lights were dim and after a short consultation, I slid between the cool sheets on the massage table. I could hear the pounding surf beneath and the inhale and exhale of my own breath. I felt Susan's hands on my neck, my shoulders and my back, my hamstrings, my hips, all the tight places, and then I drifted away into that magical state between sleeping and waking. At the end of my session, I realised there was a tiny pool of drool on my sheet. I was definitely relaxed, but more than that, I felt as though I had released some of the emotional weight I had been carrying over the past months.

It was an effort to leave the warm

Jamu, with its healing concoctions, can address a variety of illnesses, which can be of physical, emotional or spiritual origin

massage room, to dress and emerge back into the cool night air. As I walked in darkness, I looked up at the cloudless sky and took in the stars. They seemed so near, startling in their brightness. I tiptoed quietly into my room. My mystery roommate, a bubbly, older woman, was asleep. It did not take me long to fall into a dreamless sleep.

DAY 3

Predawn was now my waking hour and I walked to the baths again. Some of my classmates had the same idea and soon we were a group of four or five, discussing our favourite writers and music, and talking about the shifts we were experiencing that weekend both in our writing and in our lives.

I took that morning's yoga class, a vinyasa flow led by an Australian teacher who lived in the area. Her enthusiasm was infectious, and I moved, breathed and sweated my way to more releases. I ate breakfast with the other mother from my writing class, and we walked over together,

wondering what the morning held in store for us.

It was an intense last session. A woman shared her work, a first person account of the death of her husband. Her writing was poignant and unsettling, yet unsentimental and upon hearing her read, I felt the transient nature of life, and how amidst the transience, it is our emotions that complicate everything, yet also make it richer.

I had left home only three nights ago but felt deep in my journey. A part of me wanted to stay back for a few more days, while the other was already itching to zip back on the winding ocean-side road toward my husband and baby, who I hoped had missed me just a little over the weekend. 🌿

Eco-Insights

Committed to stewarding its land, Esalen is a living ecological lab. The property's biodynamic farm with its closed loop fertility system of composting, feeds up to 300 people daily and provides about 50 per cent of the produce for delicious, organic meals. A 'living machine' recycles approximately 3,500 gallons of waste (grey and black) water per day, which is used to irrigate its 'non-edible' landscape or flowers, bushes and trees, and you are lulled to sleep here on locally sourced organic cotton mattresses, while organic cleaning products are de rigueur. If you plan ahead, you can even get here using an excellent ride share programme.