

Transformation at the Pacific's Edge

Esalen Institute in Big Sur Offers Multi-Dimensional Healing

BY BRETT WILBUR • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAMERON JORDAN



In 1910, a Salinas physician purchased Big Sur oceanfront acreage for its famous healing waters, used by humans for at least 6,000 years, and now the site of the Esalen Institute. His grandson, Michael Murphy, co-founded the Institute with Richard Price.

Monarch butterflies flutter their bright orange wings against a crisp blue sky; the sunlight reflecting off their movements creates the appearance of sparkles. After experiencing a soak in hot springs-fed baths over the ocean and an outdoor massage set to the background music of the rolling waves of the Pacific, magical glittering butterflies seem possible, while still remarkable.

The surreal effects of the Esalen Institute's verdant 34-acre ocean-front property in Big Sur

are partly due to geography: Organic gardens blooming with Rainbow Chard and pollinator-friendly flowers are set against wide lawns, creeks and ancient Redwood forests. Everywhere is the wild ocean, casting its spell of salt air and pounding waves, which vibrate through one's soul, weather patterns ranging from brilliant sunshine to ethereal fog, and nature shows like wild birds bathing in the river; and breaching and spouting migrating Gray, Humpback and Blue whales.

The otherworldly mood is also the effect of stripping away layers both literally and figuratively. Esalen's mind-blowing array of classes, around 600 per year, are taught by world-recognized authors and leaders and include everything from sessions with Dr. Deepak Chopra, "Wild" author Cheryl Strayed, specialized yoga, art, dance and massage classes with experts in the field, and workshops such as, "Fail Fast, Fail Often! Creating a Life of Passionate Action," and a "Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Retreat."

And in those famous sulphur baths, stripping away layers while following the “clothing optional” suggestion seems to be taken more often than not. Nudity is widespread by the pool and mineral baths and doesn’t warrant a reaction.

Esalen President Gordon Wheeler explains that merging Eastern and Western traditions, insisting that personal growth goals serve society at large, and wall-shattering diplomatic tactics owe a great deal to Esalen, which celebrated its 50th anniversary several years ago.

“The whole movement for personal inquiry and personal growth and communications training was birthed at Esalen, and taken out to the culture from there,” Wheeler says. “Things that are so valuable that we take for granted today, such as Doctors Without Borders, were sparked by Esalen...Esalen brought the [Soviet] cosmonauts and [American] astronauts together...Boris Yelstin’s first visit to America was orchestrated by the Esalen Institute, and after that trip he renounced Communism.”

The nonprofit institute began as the person-



Esalen President Gordon Wheeler says students transform when they step onto campus. “Big Sur’s [effects] are not in a soft pretty way. It wakes you up.”



Clothing is optional at Esalen’s famous mineral baths, which are set above the pounding Pacific. Esalen’s renowned massage treatments take place indoors or on a deck above the hot springs-fed baths, next to a living roof of native coastal grasses.



Esalen is currently undergoing a major renovation based on environmental principles. Up to 17,000 people a year take courses at the Institute. "Youth leadership training is the most exciting to me," says Wheeler. "It includes activism, personal growth, sustainability..."

al property of Dr. Murphy, a progressive Salinas physician who bought the land in 1910 for the healing springs, which by carbon dating artifacts such as arrowheads and abalone shells, appear to have been used by the Esselen Indians dating back to thousands of years ago. Without a road to the property for 25 years, Dr. Murphy died without realizing his dreams to share the waters with the public. His grandson, Michael Murphy, along with Esalen co-founder and frustrated fellow Stanford grad Richard Price, opened the grounds as a healing spa and to address issues that were being overlooked in society and not taught in their classes.

"In those days, it was a pretty neglected property at the end of the beyond," Wheeler says. "They decided to invite the teachers they wanted to hear from and everyone who had interesting ideas in advancing human potential. They believed other people would pay for it even though it wouldn't be an academic course and they wouldn't get any credit or any help in their career," he explains.

What's amazing is the "business model" took fire immediately, and what Murphy and Price thought would last a year thrived, and eventual-

ly spawned hundreds of centers around the same model.

"Coming out of the '50s, things were pretty dampened down in the Post War period," Wheeler says. "There was a lot of post traumatic stress and a huge hunger to talk about spiritual practices outside of mainstream churches, and psychological needs outside of psychopathology and medicine, and healing outside of taking a pill."

Aldous Huxley, Paul Tillich, Buckminster Fuller and Alan Watts were some of the original visitors who accepted the invitation to speak, to the founders' "damn surprise."

Today, initiatives are created out of talks at Esalen, sustainability is emphasized, and books and films about and by the institute, including Esalen's Center for Theory & Research, continue to be released.

Esalen, it is stressed, exists to "serve the world" not to be a "refuge from it."

"Mind-body exploration was not a topic 50 years ago," Wheeler says. "You went to school, you had a career, you retired and then you died. Nothing was supposed to be happening inside you as far as personal growth. Psychotherapy

was for sick people."

Through workshops, extended study programs, internships, apprenticeships and volunteering, participants engage in art, meditation, personal and relationship exploration, living in community, cultivating the garden, working in the kitchen, and yes, soaking in those famous baths. Children are welcome too: the one-acre Gazebo Park School cares for kids up to age 6 in an off-the-grid, outdoor-based learning center.

Currently undergoing a three-year renewal program that includes an updated energy-efficient Lodge, which houses the bookstore, office and eating facilities, the Institute is more relevant than ever, according to Wheeler. He says we live in an age of integration between ideas and generations and he's optimistic that what seem like insoluble world problems can, in fact, be solved by the youth of today.

"Esalen is a 52-year-old conversation across boundaries," he says. "It's about breaking things down."

For more information on Esalen Institute, please go to www.esalen.org or call 888/837-2536. Esalen is located at 55000 Highway 1 in Big Sur, by reservation only.