



These four Quebec retreats can help you find your Zen

BRUCE SACH

Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Mar. 17, 2016 12:09PM EDT

Last updated Thursday, Mar. 17, 2016 4:57PM EDT

As I hand over my cell phone, car keys, wallet, camera and books to the handlers at the Vipassana Centre in Montebello, Que., I realize I am doing more than merely parting with some material things for 10 days. Like the 80 other participants in this silent, meditative retreat, I am entrusting my freedom to total strangers, albeit in the hope of attaining a deeper freedom – the freedom from the “monkey” brain that evolution has entrusted to us. You know, when your mind jumps from one thought to another, to another, when all you’re trying to do is concentrate on a spot on the tip of your nose.

Given the deep and historical roots of traditional religious practice in Quebec, it is quite amazing that present-day Quebec is so genuinely interested in non-traditional forms of spiritual retreats and quests through a true diversity of offerings.

The four centres I experienced made no attempt to convert visitors nor to coerce them in any way. To boot, they are relatively inexpensive. To add to their appeal, they are located in jaw-droppingly beautiful spots. The programs they offer require a certain discipline and a willingness to adapt one’s worldview, at least for the duration of your stay.

French is not a must. Indeed partial or full silent French immersion is not only desirable, but getting out of your comfort zone may be just what you seek, *sans le savoir!*

Vipassana Meditation Centre, Montebello, Que.

Here, it’s all about strict meditation. However, aside from the three mandatory, scheduled meditative periods – one is free to do as one pleases – just remember, all your habitual diversions and toys will have been carefully stored away.

It is best to use the free time to enrich your meditative practice and, as you’ve probably surmised, there’s little else available to occupy one’s mind, aside from walks in the valley next to the centre’s beautiful grounds.

Vegetarian meals are provided for breakfast and lunch. For first timers, there is food available at teatime (that’s five in the afternoon), but you are rarely hungry.

The meditative technique is explained in nightly pretaped teachings, available in virtually every major language. The centre is located in a former private-school residence and men and women remain separated, even for meals (also silent) during the entire 10 days.

Pay what you can, 810 Côte Azélie, Notre-Dame-de-Bonsecours, Montebello, Que., suttama.dhamma.org

Sentiers du Silence Saint-Damien-de-Buckland, Que.

I had become particularly irritated by the noises of modern life before heading off to spend a week at the Sentiers du Silence (paths of silence), which takes place every summer near Riviere-du-Loup.

Only Sister Merzel, a member of the sisters of Charity of Quebec and the leader of the retreat, is allowed to speak. "Silence purifies," she says. Sister Merzel must know, having once endured 3 1/2 years in total silence.

We meet three times daily for group meditation and guidance, which involves being directed in our thoughts and contemplations. Sister Merzel also encouraged reflection on past actions, mistakes and future action. "Define your identity, reflect on your values," she said. Time between those thrice-daily sessions was spent in reflection.

Since noise had been my bugbear, my encounter in the middle of the night with a mosquito was my acid test. I chose to ignore its buzzing, and it worked! I fell asleep, oblivious to the mosquito's taunting buzz.

At the end of the retreat, I was calmer, and felt ready to confront new realities with more serenity. And now, whenever I wake up in the middle of the night, I think about the mosquito incident and fall back to sleep – in peace.

Sentiers du Silence, 161 Chemin de Lac Vert St., Saint-Damien-de-Buckland, Que; \$320.00, including lodging and food. sentiersdusilence.com

Sivananda Ashram Yoga Camp Val Morin, Que.

The Sivananda Ashram Yoga Camp, located in the Laurentians at Val Morin, is the granddaddy of yoga practice in North America. It was founded in the 1960s by Swami Vishnudevananda, the man who turned the Beatles on to yoga and meditation before they met Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The plane (decorated by pop artist Peter Max) that Swami flew into East Berlin in the 1960s is stored here.

At the yoga camp (run exactly like an ashram in India), participants undergo a daily schedule designed to incorporate the five points of hatha yoga as interpreted by the centre and *pranayamas* (yogic postures and breathing exercises).

The morning begins at 5:30 a.m. at the Yoga Hall and a series of scheduled classes fill the day, a day that officially ends at 10 p.m. Life in the ashram allows the option of karma (community service work) and a chance to experience an Ayurvedic diet (consisting of simple Indian fare, based on your dosha, or nutritional constitution).

I stayed at the main lodge, also called the Bale Lodge, and I can still smell the lovely scent of hay that permeates the building.

The atmosphere there is one of peace, and the experience left me with two legacies – I'd connected with yoga devotees from around the world (Uruguay and Hawaii in my case) and I'd mastered the art of yogic breathing.

Sivananda Ashram Yoga Camp, \$90 a person per day, all meals included. If you stay in a tent, it's \$45 a person, a day. 673 8th Ave., Val Morin, Que., sivananda.org/encamp

Le Monastère des Augustines Quebec City, Que.

"Neither hunger, nor cold, nor isolation would prevent them, from establishing a haven here to heal the bodies of an entire people." So reads the mission statement, written in 1639, at Quebec's newest wellness centre. The Monastère des Augustines opened to the public exactly 376 years after the first Augustine Sisters' arrival to New France, after which they immediately began setting up Canada's first hospital/health system.

Today, this very contemporary wellness centre offers rooms, meals and a wide variety of programs housed in a huge, but discreetly located historical complex in the old walled city, which was, until recently, a cloistered monastery. The quiet and silence is breathtaking although the ambience is anything but sterile.

Endless halls lead to the numerous salons where yoga, meditation, creativity and wellness classes occur daily. Workshops and conferences on different topics, ranging from sleep recuperation, to indoor gardening, to topics such as Health through Happiness, take place all year long in both English and French.

Guests are encouraged to eat breakfast in silence, out of respect to the monastery's traditions, but of the four centres reviewed here, it might be considered the most accessible for tenderfoots making their first foray into the universe of spiritual retreats.

*Le Monastère des Augustines, \$84 a person based on double occupancy, includes breakfast and parking. 77 Des Remparts St., Quebec City, monastere.ca/en
The writer was a guest of Le Monastère des Augustines. It did not review or approve the story.*