

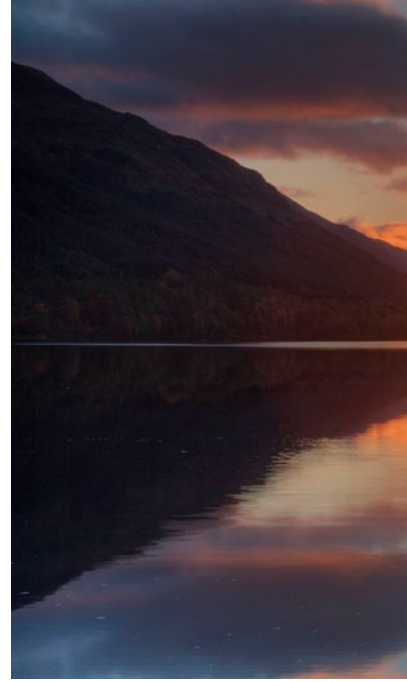


Global Spirituality

by Bryen Dunn

The word spirituality has become synonymous with a belief in variety of thoughts, transcendental well being, inner strength, and religion. Spiritual practices and experiences may include meditation of the mind, body development, or prayer rituals that often include a connection with nature, awareness of one's inner self, or worshipping of an existential existence of some kind. Although often associated directly with religion, spirituality is now a term commonly used by many secular, atheist and agnostic individuals who seek refuge with inner peace and happiness. Religion implies a particular faith tradition that includes acceptance of a metaphysical or supernatural reality, whereas spirituality is not necessarily bound to any particular religious tradition. Many seek spirituality through new age practices, alternative medicines and treatments and self help programs to aid in bringing about a state of higher awareness, perfection of one's own being and wisdom, or a connection with a higher strength, whatever that may be.

Continuing our year-long series on health and well-being, join me as I look at some spiritual retreats around the continent, beginning here in Canada.



The Dharma Centre (www.dharmacentre.org) in Huntsville, Ontario was founded by the late Namgyal Rinpoche, and has a 45 year history of prayer, meditation, study and ceremony. It's a rustic centre located on 400 acres of pristine land in central Ontario, within driving distance from most major cities such as Toronto and Ottawa.

They offer a range of diverse programs in all forms of Buddhism, as well as Shamanism, Mindfulness and more. They respect and support universal spiritual and religious teachings and have cabins available for people who wish to do solo retreats, or groups who want to rent the entire centre to hold their own. The centre can accommodate roughly forty guests in either single or double rooms or cabins with camping also a possibility. Onsite facilities include a full kitchen where guests can prepare their own meals, or have them provided in the case of groups. There's also an extensive library of books pertaining to spirituality, science, philosophy, psychology and the arts.

The natural surroundings include a number of walking trails on and around the property and canoeing or kayaking can be done on an adjacent lake. A number of monuments and sacred spots are located around the property, including a Buddha rupa, a Burmese pagoda, a Tibetan stupa and a mother goddess walkway. For those with limited funds, there are opportunities for people to volunteer in exchange for accommodation.

South of the border, **SpiritQuest** (www.retreatsinsedona.com) differentiates itself from other lodges by not utilizing a centralized retreat facility. What makes SpiritQuest unique is the fact that their retreats are customized to the needs of each individual client rather than set within a group setting. This allows clients to arrive whenever they want and stay as long as they want and they can stay anywhere they like within a ten mile radius of the main office, allowing them to choose their own level of comfort and budget.

The staff consists of a core team of 20 practitioners, each with their own specialties. There are meditation teachers, sound healers, hypnotherapists, psychotherapists, ceremonialists, and many other modalities. Most have over 10 years experience in the field of personal transformation, and some have over 20, allowing for a more customized program. Representative Ed Preston reiterates, "In a private retreat the sessions are one-on-one and the attention is all on the client, so people usually feel freer to open up and get the work done. We're also fortunate to be in a place where nature does half the work for us." SpiritQuest is about becoming more authentically yourself, having the courage to follow your heart and connecting with source.

Kalani (www.kalani.com) was founded by Richard Koob and his partner Earnest Morgan, two professional dancers who fell in love with Hawaii nearly 40 years ago. They came to this piece of untamed jungle in the wildest corner of Hawaii and over the years transformed it into the largest retreat centre in the state. The centre is largely managed by gay and lesbian staff, yet caters to a diverse audience with a strong emphasis on yoga, performing arts, wellness/massage and Hawaiian culture. Support also comes by way of volunteers who donate their time for up to three months assisting with a variety of tasks.

The majority of their programming is open to all, but there are several men's weeks throughout the year with women's programming soon to be introduced. Drew Delaware, a Torontonian has been living and doing some consulting at Kalani for the last year and shared, "Lesbian and gay visitors love coming any time of the year and the gay community here is the most accepting and loving that I've ever experienced. It's truly paradise—a gay Shangri-la."

Upcoming workshops and retreats include: Nude Yoga; Singing with Courage; A Call for Heroes: Initiation into Power and Purpose; Strengthening Your Heart; and Cultivating Inner Strength and Radiance.



Page 31: SpiritQuest Retreats, Sedona, AZ;
Page 32: Kalani, Pahoehoe, HI, Photo by Jess Scranton;
Page 32/33 and page 33: Dhanakosa, Balquhiddier,
Lochearnhead, Scotland



On the other side of the Atlantic, **Hamilton Hall** (www.hamiltonhall.info) is located in Bournemouth, Dorset County, England, and is the only clothing optional retreat in Europe that is exclusively for gay and bisexual men. Programming is primarily focused around sexual, self and spiritual development for the mind, body and soul. Owned and operated by John Bellamy, a former sex trade worker, psychologist and care worker, who saved his earnings over the years and opened the property in March 2000.

Hamilton Hall has since appeared in the UK television program *Three in a Bed* and garnered reviews globally, including mention on CNN, SKY, and FOX. The Victorian House is filled with wonderful mood lighting, warm rich colour schemes and a bright and contemporary feel with traditional comforts. It is ideally located approximately a 15 minute walk to the centre of town, and a ten minute walk to the sea.

Hamilton Hall is a spiritual urban oasis, supporting, metaphysical, spiritual, alternative, holistic, new age and complimentary lifestyle. Bellamy believes strongly in the gay spiritual soul and has tried to live his life according to a spiritual code that links us all. "Life can be hard, and it's easy to find yourself in need of guidance. There have, and will continue to be, moments when we feel lost, alone, or even abandoned by those we trusted. Yet for me personally, my spiritual faith has always kept me going", he cites.

Dhanakosa (www.dhanakosa.com) provides a variety of retreats open to anyone, regardless of sexual orientation, and they also offer an exclusive gay men's retreat in the spring each year which has been running successfully for the past decade. Next year the dates are March 22nd to 29th and are lead by Mangala, an ordained Buddhist in the Triratna Buddhist Order.

Buddhism teaches that all beings regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation, have the same spiritual potential to develop greater awareness, kindness, compassion and understanding. Individuals explore the Buddhist path of ethics, meditation and wisdom, by way of talks, discussion groups, meditation and other practices. Dhanakosa is located in the Southern Highlands of Scotland, in the beautiful Balquhiddier glen, on the shores of Loch Voil, and has been offering retreats there since 1992. The centre operates on the basis of donations received from friends and visitors, with reservations taken for a booking fee of £75. Anything above and beyond is based on each individual's discretion.

My Own Dolce Vita (www.gaydolcevita.com) is spearheaded by John Ballew, a psychotherapist living in Atlanta who has been leading retreats for gay men in Italy for over a decade. He says "It's a different way of experiencing Italy. We're about slowing down, enjoying life and exploring with a group of like-minded gay men. The pace is designed to help men recharge their batteries—but just as important—to inspire them to bring the good life home with them after their time away."

Produced in cooperation with Il Chiostro, the retreat balances seeing Tuscany, light self-exploration and time to relax around the 18th century villa's pool overlooking a picturesque valley. A private chef is onsite who is integral to the component of sharing an evening of good food, good wine, and good conversation. The handsomely restored villa located in the rural countryside just outside of Cortona is the perfect spot to relax and get away from it all. Each day there is time for some light meditation, getting to know other guests and sharing what makes for a great

Counter-clockwise starting from the right: Siena, Italy; Villa at Dolce Vita, Italy; Photo from "Out in the Woods", Greenwich, New York, Photo credit: Dave Dietz; Photo from "Out in the Woods", Greenwich, New York, Photo credit: Dave Dietz



life. There's also a visit to Montalcino, Assisi and other beautiful places in the area. Ballew knows how many of us are stressed by the demands of work and daily life, and his program helps men to experience Italy as travellers rather than tourists. His next retreat happens in June, 2013.

For me personally, the ideal retreat would involve music of some sort, as I find this very therapeutic, especially when experienced in the right environs. **The Quebec International Festival of Sacred Music** (www.imsq.ca/eng/default.asp) offers this opportunity without any religious or linguistic barriers or restrictions. The Festival spotlights international musicians inspired by spirituality, who through their music

express soothing and stirring powers. Sometimes meditative, sometimes exalted, sacred music is the reflection of the human spirit and its passions.

Easton Mountain is a community retreat centre and sanctuary created by gay men, offering workshops, programs and events to celebrate, heal, transform, and integrate body, mind and spirit. They hold an annual queer music festival each summer called Out in the Woods (www.eastonmountain.co), set in the bucolic foothills of the Green Mountains in Greenwich, New York. It's a celebration of queer talent and creativity that raises awareness and support for their LGBTQ Youth Summer Camp.

Whatever direction you choose, going on a retreat of some sort is becoming more the norm rather than the exception. It's simply about taking time away from your ordinary life and everyday situations, and reflecting back upon yourself. Choose your journey, pack your necessary belongings, and leave your baggage behind!



Bryen Dunn is a freelance journalist based in Toronto with a focus on tourism, lifestyle, entertainment and community issues. He has written several travel articles and has an extensive portfolio of celebrity interviews with musicians, actors and other public personalities. He's willing to take on any assignments of interest, attend parties with free booze, listen to rants, and travel the world in search of the great unknown. He's eager to discover the new, remember the past, and look into the future.

