

METRO

Travel as therapy: 5 ways to experience the benefits and leave your troubles at home

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According to the Mental Health Foundation, in the past year 74% of us have felt so stressed or overwhelmed that we haven't known how to cope. The UK-wide survey, commissioned by YouGov, also found how 32% of people – nearly a third – had experienced suicidal feelings or thoughts because of that stress.

I am a part of the 74%. Many of my friends are, too. In fact, it was 12 years ago when I first experienced that feeling of being so overwhelmed by life, I didn't know how to feel better. At the time, I had gone through a tough break-up. Things hadn't ended well and the relationship hadn't been a healthy one. I came out feeling like I had lost confidence, dignity and, most of all, myself. I tried to keep going with my daily routines. Going to work, catching up with friends, spending time with family. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough. The need to escape my everyday life was overwhelming. But I didn't feel like I wanted out completely – I just needed a break. I needed some time and space to heal. That was the first time I packed a bag and booked a one-way ticket out of London. It was also when I discovered the power of travel as therapy.

According to Karin Peeters – a coach and psychotherapist at Vitalis Coaching, and founder of Inner Pilgrim – travel as therapy can be hugely beneficial for anyone feeling they need a little time out. 'Sometimes retreat is the best way to move forward,' says Peeters. 'Taking distance from our lives and daily routine brings fresh perspective. 'To travel is to pause, to press the stop button for a moment in order to recuperate and heal.'

I ended up being away for 12 months. Since then, whenever I have felt overwhelmed, I book a ticket out for some valuable travel as therapy. The fact that I love to travel and visit new places means I'm doing something I love in the process, rather than hiding away from the world. Today, travel is still my best therapy. Here are five reasons how travel as therapy could help you.

Choosing your destination and booking the ticket

The initial excitement of booking a ticket is an incredible feeling. The thought you are actually making this happen is empowering – particularly as you are doing something great to help yourself. The idea of a lifestyle change, however temporary, can feel refreshing too. Once booked, the planning and research around the trip can be a fantastic distraction from whatever may be overwhelming you. Every time you do feel the stress creeping in, it is liberating to know you will soon be free of that.

Getting to know the locals

Putting your own life into perspective can really help your mind heal from any hardship you may have suffered. I find travelling within other cultures and learning about ways of life different to my own really helps me see my worries in a different light. Instead of seeing the negative, I begin to focus on the positive.

‘It’s humbling to experience first-hand how the locals are coping with their own hardships,’ says Peeters. ‘It puts our own worries into perspective and inspires us to carry our own challenges with grace. Feeling the joy and happiness of the locals can bring gratitude and simplifies our life.’

Going somewhere beautiful

No matter what’s been going on in my head, nothing makes me feel more ready to face the day than waking up to a vast and beautiful landscape. ‘A serene surrounding and a little distance from our daily routine are sometimes exactly what we need to heal, be inspired and move forward in life,’ suggests Peeters. New Zealand in particular, with its blue lakes fringed with ice-capped mountains, blew any negative thoughts out of my mind. Some places unexpectedly make me cry – out of happiness. Seeing raw, natural beauty like that make me grateful for the simple things in life – such as the ability to see, the means to travel and witness this beautiful scene for myself. Sometimes that is all you need to remind yourself that everything will be OK.

Giving yourself time and space, but being open to new friendships

Going travelling allows you to be in charge of your daily life. You can be as sociable or as secluded as you like. I tend to spend a lot of time in my own thoughts: reading books and articles I’ve intended to read for ages or writing about my experiences. It feels like a huge accomplishment to do those little things I never have time to do in everyday life. Getting plenty of good sleep is also a huge plus and, when you are a world away from your worries, sleep tends to come a lot easier. I also use that me-time to go for walks, get massages – they usually cost much less abroad – go swimming and engage in other active and outdoor things that make my body feel great. When I do decide it’s time to mingle, I go in with a different mindset and I feel ready to meet new people who accept me for me. Whether it’s at a cafe, on a beach, at a bar, temple or on a boat – there are always like-minded individuals to get chatting to. Some of my dearest friends are people who I have met on public transport in foreign countries. ‘While travelling we’ll meet many teachers,’ says

Peeters. 'We're more open to receive insight from the most surprising encounters. 'For many, those they meet during travel encounters can become like a second family. This newly chosen community of like-minded souls can bring great healing.'

Embracing the time and space away

Sometimes, a bit of space from a problem makes all the difference in trying to resolve it. I often find if I've had some time away, I see my stresses in a new light – and perhaps they weren't as big and impenetrable as I thought. Making the most of that time and space and living in the moment, is a great way to relax, forget and let that weight lift.

'At home, we are usually trying to fix what's 'broken' and if we fail to actively sort things out, that sense of failure makes us feel even worse,' explains Peeters. 'But while travelling we slow down and we become more open to receive solutions, ideas, options and choices.'