

lost and found in mexico

by Denise Dubé

“Gone gone totally gone... totally completely gone... enlightened... so be it.”

—one translation from *The Heart Sutra*

Note: For privacy's sake, only first names are used in some cases.

One came from Florida, escaping from the pain of a broken marriage. Another came from Virginia, worried that her burgeoning business would weaken without her constant care. One left her baby daughter at home with her husband in Mexico City, concerned he might not provide the care only she had given so far. Another traveled from Boston, tired, overwrought and confused. One left a Washington, D.C. delivery room, exhausted after a 36-hour shift that culminated in the birth of a healthy baby girl. Still another came from Virginia, wondering if this weeklong wellness retreat would be as successful as she'd hoped. One came from the south bringing work that required a lawyer's final touches. One came to support her daughter. Another came out of curiosity. One didn't even want to go.

But everyone left a few days later — grateful — and with a clearer, brighter perspective on life.

The concept of escape

We gathered at the Hacienda Sepulveda in Guanajuato, Mexico. The spectacular pink-stucco hacienda, built in 1684, sits regally in the Mexican highlands, embracing the past and enveloping guests with its simplicity and more than a few centuries of history. Those who live in the state of Guanajuato know this sanctuary, one that overlooks miles of untouched landscape. Guests who stay under its bricked and arched ceilings feel themselves blossoming along with the flowers and the trees. The healing powers began as soon as we walked past the ancient wood and stucco entrance. Though the sprawling building appeared as one unit behind a long stucco wall, inside it was a maze of safe havens and suites, gardens and terraces connecting several buildings. Colorful ceramic tiles wove paths along the hallway floors and led to gardens under the open sky. Our bedrooms ran along those same hallways and looked out across the lush gardens. Ancient stone steps nearby brought others up to another set of bedrooms.

While we made our way to our rooms faint echoes of those who lived, stayed and worked there wafted through the windows and the gardens like a warm summer breeze.

During the next few days we seemed to blossom, revealing and getting to know ourselves and each other in the process. Even the brilliantly colored peacocks, and the chickens, horses and dogs seemingly noticed the change from citified stress to colonial calm. The wildlife sat nearby as we ate, talked or meditated. Sometimes the animals seemed to be trying to communicate with us. The book *Like Water for Chocolate* immediately came to mind. A day later, I learned that its writer, Laura Esquivel, lived a few hours away in Mexico City and knew this area well. In my mind this was her muse and now served as ours. This hacienda was a character in our own burgeoning story.

A favorite spot to relax at Hacienda Sepulveda, located at the crossroads of three major tourism cities: Guadalajara, Guanajuato and Zacatecas.

PHOTO BY KATY POLGOVSKY

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Perhaps the magic of this setting is why Lillian Avilés-Chapa chose Hacienda Sepulveda for her first “Flor Mind Body and Soul Escape.” This soft spoken dark-haired savvy public relations representative moved a few steps away from packaged retreats and created Flor Escapes, a whole wellness concept for and about women, one that focuses on the spiritual, emotional and physical aspects of a woman’s life without forgetting the realities of wholesome food and a glass of fine wine.

A tale of personal journeys

When I had arrived at Leon Airport, I gravitated toward Honi Borden, another member of the “Flor Escape” team. We hopped into the van and headed to meet our soon-to-be-friends in Colonial Mexico. This part of the country isn’t well populated. The only signs of life were a lone and battered gas station, a few houses and some farms.

During the 30-mile route to the hacienda I learned Honi was happily married, had two sons and owned Holeco Wellness Medi Spa in Washington, D.C. It is one of the first spas of its kind and Honi’s passion for healthy living is mirrored in her business and within her family life. With her slight healthy body and gleaming hair and complexion, I figured she knew what she was talking about.

Holeco is her passion and she said that she had left her husband in charge, explaining every aspect of the business’s needs before reluctantly leaving it all in his hands. I told her about my husband and children, my job as a writer and the stress of anxiety-ridden deadlines.

Immersed in our conversation we arrived in what seemed like minutes. Once the van left our luggage on the hacienda’s grounds only a lone black buggy stood on the property. Horses peered out of the brick and aged wood stables and chickens and peacocks roamed the landscaped acres. The van left, its wheels leaving a final reminder of the 21st century in the form of beige opaque dust waves.

We met the staff and our Flor Escapes comrades. Liz Bear, a Virginia acupuncturist, was preparing for a horse ride. Liz’s best friend, Michelle Jacobs, a 36-year-old Washington, D.C. obstetrician, was back in the room they shared at the corner of the hacienda.

Anna Dunaeva Maneno and Paula, friends and co-workers for a PR firm, were talking and laughing in the foyer. Lillian Avilés-Chapa, also preparing to ride, ran out to greet us with warm hugs and a contagious smile.

Suzanne, a non-profit lawyer from the south, was in her room working on reviews needed in her office within two days.

Not everyone was from the states. Katy Polgovsky lived in Mexico City, and took a bus to the hacienda. The quiet light-haired Mexican beauty had an air of calmness that belied worries about her daughter. With limited English she told us that she had never left Sara, her 18 month old. Just as Sara had taken her first steps months before, now her mom was taking her first “independent” steps and it wasn’t easy.

Lillian told us that we would all be gathering in the dining room that evening, and in the morning we would meet Kourosh



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Kashani, the man who would lead our Yoga, Qigong and meditation classes. Meanwhile, the first afternoon was ours to explore. Some rode horses, Honi and I unpacked while Suzanne kept working. Paula relaxed by the pool and Lillian’s mother Lillian Pimentel-Williams (yes, with an “m”) explored the grounds. I walked around my room, awed by the 17th century décor, still unchanged after all this time. My room’s wooden door opened to a garden that held benches, a small table and walkways to other sections of the hacienda. The door, aged with time, barely closed properly. The room’s original ceiling, probably 15-20 feet above my bed, was arched in a red patterned brick. I wondered whose hands had placed those bricks in



Clockwise from above: The recently opened spa was built in what was once the hay room. A highlight of the spa is the temazcal, a pre-Hispanic therapeutic steam room; The inside open air courtyard is a common element of Spanish design; A bedroom at the hacienda, where original doors open up to the courtyard; Honi and Kourosh practice Qigong, a Chinese meditative practice that promotes good health using slow movements and controlled breathing.

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such an intricate and perfect pattern back in 1684.

My window — a floor-to-ceiling opening to the hacienda's grounds — was original, but thankfully had a screen, so I could sleep with the wooden shutters open and not get eaten alive by bugs. The bottom of the shuttered "window" was covered with a wrought iron grill. Eyes closed, I let my mind wander, wondering about the others who had stayed here in the past, and did they realize the beauty that surrounded them?

Thankfully, the bathroom was modern, although I had serious doubts that would be the case when I first saw the décor. The modern lav was hidden behind another set of doors that separated the old from the new.

A peaceful atmosphere permeated our surroundings. No airplanes flew overhead and the absence of traffic noises was noticeable. No motors or power tools were present, just birds chirping or leaves rustling; it was simply blessed silence, which we would come to expect over the next few days.

Dinner was at 7 p.m., around a large family-style table. We anxiously looked at each other wondering what lie ahead. After an incredibly simple yet elegant Mexican meal, Lillian produced a small basket. She passed paper and pens around the table and asked us to write something personal about ourselves and then throw it in the basket. The idea was that when we finished, we would pass the basket around and read about a small slice of someone else's life.

With pen and paper in hand, I thought about what to "confess" to these strangers. The whole trip was a leap of faith, so what the heck. After a disappointing visit years ago, I had no intention of ever returning to Mexico. But, an accidental New York meeting with Lillian, one that included a discussion about the differences between the authentic Mexico and my less-than-wonderful experience in Cancun, she promised to change my mind. Her invitation to Flor Escapes brought me to Guanajuato. I knew the moment I stepped off the plane she was right.

So, I wrote my biggest secret, one that no one would ever guess of this globetrotting, adventurous travelgirl. Nope, not gonna tell you mine or theirs. These confessions gave way to intense, heartfelt discussions, and by night's end we started caring about each other. With one basket and a few pieces of paper Lillian had made sure our journey started with laughter and love. It continued throughout the weekend, and our sharing had the healing impact that only female bonding can have.

Later that night our chatting continued over sips of Mexican liquor. Michelle spoke of the stresses in her job. She loved delivering babies, but was tired of the hierarchy and the politics. Liz looked at her friend lovingly and offered comfort and suggested changing direction. I talked about my brain surgery and migraines; Lillian listened to Michelle and me and offered support. Anna sat, quietly. It was past midnight when we stopped. Our 7:30 a.m. class would come early, so Michelle slipped the bottle back behind the bar and we headed for our beds.

Chirping birds and squawking peacocks knew I overslept and woke me at 7:15 a.m. I quickly dressed and ran out of the hacienda into a boxy brick building where our classes were held.



Remembering how to breathe

Kourosh greeted us and we sat in a semi-circle around him. He began a yoga session, speaking in hushed and even tones. Though we would do the 12 positions of the Surya Namaskar — yoga's sun salutation — and various relaxing Qigong movements, our biggest task was to learn how to breathe and to center ourselves. Gently in, mouth closed, gently out, mouth closed. Life went from one breath to another. This lesson would serve us all well in the coming weeks and months.

Breakfast of eggs, salsa, cheese and bread followed and then we headed outside for meditation and self-soothing classes designed to teach us how to comfort our souls during stress. Lunch was a communal affair at a long table outside my window. Afternoons were spent around a pool, hidden behind the middle of the hacienda's wall.

There, as Anna stood in the water and waved her arms back and forth I learned of her life. Her husband had ended their young marriage only a few weeks earlier. She was moving from her Florida home to Washington, D.C. The petite blonde's happy demeanor belied her pain.

While there Katy spoke of her grandmother, Katy Horna, a famous photographer in the area. Katy had spent the last few years gathering information on her work and setting up exhibitions. It was her dream to follow the elder Katy's work.

Each woman had a story, a reason for the need to "escape." Some of the stories were so personal they cannot be shared here. Liz confessed that she was stuck in the usual "I need to do everything" mommy mode. She had initially dismissed the idea of this girlfriend getaway, saying she'd done similar

retreats while getting her acupuncture degree. Her husband, Chris promised that he could care for Julia, four, and Anna-belle, two. After she balked he went ahead and bought the trip and pushed her out the door, telling her she needed the break.

Tall, lanky and self-assured, Liz is a powerful woman. So, it was a surprise to hear her say she packed and "left reluctantly, with a real sense of nervousness about leaving everyone."

She came to support her friend Lillian and to hang around with Michelle. "I was willing to participate," she said. But, she wasn't expecting much.

Afternoon spa treatments in a converted brick building near the hacienda rounded out our wellness training. Horseback riding, naps, walks, swaying in the hammocks, daydreaming and talking took up the remaining hours.

There were tears, laughter, prayers and spontaneous circles of hands around the dinner table. Mostly there was a lot of love. And breathing. Kourosh said we couldn't forget to breathe.

Measuring the power of escape

At the start no one really knew what to expect. It didn't seem to matter once we started to really see and hear each other. We mattered. Our classes mattered. The outside world started to blur. This piece of heaven was our reality — and a place to find a new reality that we could take home.

Liz and Honi caught their "breath" immediately. "I'm glad I'm here," occurred during the first meditation," said Liz. She had exhaled and released her worries. Honi did the same. The tiny brunette, with her signature yellow dress, shirt, shoes or necklace, smiled wider and wider.

I let go the second day of our classes. I couldn't help smiling during meditation. I thought of my husband, my bountiful life and these strong powerful women sitting around me. Maybe it was the breathing, maybe it was the atmosphere, all I know is I felt joy that I hadn't felt in a long while.

A migraine hit me one night and Honi sat beside me on a bench outside my room. She took my hand and, like Kourosh, asked me to breathe. Then she took the fleshy portion of my hand, between the thumb and first finger and squeezed, hard. The headache began to subside. She tried teaching me the procedure, although I've yet to get it down.

We were learning about each other's lives, loves and dreams. After an acupuncture treatment from Liz I felt a renewed calmness and a release of grief. Michelle and Anna talked more. Lillian spoke of her husband and the life she led before him. Paula relaxed by the pool. She shared with funny sarcastic quips.

The most incredible transformation occurred on the second day at lunch. Susan, our lawyer in residence, arrived at the hacienda showing the stress of her job. Quiet and reserved, with her hair pulled back tightly into a roll, this tiny 31-year-old was our "serious" member. But for this meal, Susan came to the table with her hair loosely falling around her shoulders. She wore a big smile, clothing that accented her flawless complexion and sporting a new and noticeable attitude. She had shipped off her last review and had finally dipped her soul into the retreat.

The end came too quickly and we packed to leave. At our

last class Kourosh reminded us to keep breathing evenly and to be aware of our breath. He promised us we would each be tested in the coming days. With renewed vigor we went home confident that life's challenges could and would be met.

Liz and Michelle faced the first hurdle. It came on the airplane home and put Kourosh's breathing practice to the

She had shipped off her last review and had finally dipped her soul into the retreat.

test. Their plane dropped 1,000 feet and there was a mechanical problem, causing them to make an emergency landing in Texas. Liz and Michelle held hands and breathed. Somehow the flight attendant sensed their calmness and asked Michelle and Liz for help if she was injured and unable to help passengers. Michelle would stand by the door and Liz would make sure Michelle wasn't trampled. Prepared for anything, and scared to death, they inhaled and exhaled. Although the landing was probably the worst they ever experienced, everyone was fine and the two exited the plane — alive and stronger in spirit.

There were subtle and not so subtle transformations. Dr. Michelle Jacobs now lives in Palm Beach, Florida. "I came back and realized I had to make a change," she said in a telephone interview a few months later. Only a few hours after she came home from Mexico Michelle told her supervisor she needed time off and began searching. She finally found her niche in Florida. She is practicing preventive medicine at the Palm Beach County Health Department. Near the beach and happy, she feels as though she's on vacation every day.

The retreat helped her leave obstetrics and move on to the next phase of her career. "I think being in a peaceful place and just working through the process made it okay for me to make the decision, one that I had probably already made but wasn't ready to do anything about," she said. "It's like reading a book. You're halfway through, so you finish."



Opposite page: Lillian, Katy and Lillian, who created Flor Escapes. Above: Kourosh, Anna, Lillian, Paula and Lillian practice Qigong, practiced by millions of people around the world, and loosely translated means "working with one's life force."

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Suzanne is still a non-profit lawyer, but she's a little less exhausted and now has a fiancé. Her work weeks aren't always 70 hours long anymore. A few months later she spoke of the changes the retreat made in her life and the lessons she learned. "I work really hard to help others. That includes weekends. I sacrificed things for myself and my own well-being," she said. "The trip and the wellness aspect brought home that we can't ignore our well-being and ourselves. In order to be better people with our families and those we help — and with *everybody* — it's important to be well yourself. If you're stressed out all the time you're going to be irritable and not the best person you can be."

I bet she's a better lawyer too.

Honi Borden was and is Honi Borden. Although she came just a little worried about her business, she let it go and she came and left with the calmness and wisdom we all sought. Her gain was new friends. As a devoted advocate for healthy living she went back determined to continue educating the public. By the time you read this she'll have completed Reiki courses and will add that to her list of healing talents.

Although Lillian never showed any anxiety, the 33-year-old later admitted that she was worried about creating this women's healing adventure. "I was nervous, but it was a positive nervous," she said. "I was trying to make it an experience for everyone. After a few days I felt I was meant to do this."

"There was such a sense of union," she said of our confessions and discussions.

What she created obviously influenced her too. Since that first Flor Escape she said she's learned to trust her instincts. So much so in fact, that she and her husband, Felipe, and their son Sebastian rented out their Washington, D.C. home and moved to Malinalco, Mexico a few months ago. There she'll expand Flor Escapes and launch her newest venture, The Mystic Triangle. She still occasionally commutes to her Washington office. "I walked away from everything thinking, *This can help others and be beautiful.*"

As for Anna, she's now in Malinalco working with Lillian. Her story gets even better. She and her husband decided to save their marriage.

Although we knew of her heartbreak during our retreat, Anna hid it well. It was only months later she admitted, "I was lost. I didn't know what to do with my life," she said. "I thought I had a plan. I thought I was married to the love of my life. Within a day it disappeared when my husband said he didn't want to be married anymore."

So, Anna had signed on to Flor Escapes because, after almost five years of marriage, her life was in disarray. She needed something and she, like the rest of us, found it. "My journey began when I went on that trip. It taught me that I cannot plan my life."

Even today she clings to one of Kourosh's lessons. "The one word that is still with me every day of my life is 'surrender.'"

She's now giving herself time and care, foreign commodities in her previous life. "I am finding myself again," she said. Her journey is ongoing and so promising!

While her husband finishes school she's in Mexico, com-

mitted to her own growth and self-love. "The first step is the realization I have to find me."

That's the lesson. It seems so obvious, but somehow life seems to create curtains that keep us hidden from ourselves. Taking that journey to Mexico put each of us on a path to drawing that curtain. Perhaps Anna put it best when she said a few months later, "During that week we felt strong. Every woman on that trip was amazing. Younger, older, whatever, everybody lived through difficulty and overcame something."

I came home to have knee surgery. During the 45-minute MRI I used Kourosh's "just breathe" advice to keep my leg and mind still. I did so well the attendant asked when I had fallen asleep. "I never fell asleep," I told him. "I just breathed and meditated." I watch my breathing now whenever I get upset.

Katy seems to have stopped worrying about her daughter, and she laughs and talks more. She was, she said, determined to organize her grandmother's work, but more importantly, wanted to become a photographer. Some of the photos for this article are by Katy Polgovsky. She has accomplished her dream and I'm certain she'll continue publishing her photographs in other magazines and newspapers.

I've always known travel was a source for life's greatest lessons and this experience may be my truest example. During our classes and one chanting session, we felt a joyful lift in our souls. Kourosh gave his take on what occurred. "Forces that were bigger than us were there," he said. "Spiritual forces moving people to feel and experience things they couldn't explain."

We all felt our souls shift. Kourosh said he felt we had each started a journey. Perhaps that's why our lives changed so dramatically... and why we still practice our breathing.

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Flor Escapes
www.florescapes.com

Hacienda Sepulveda
www.haciendasepulveda.com.mx

Colonial Mexico Guanajuato
www.visitmexico.com

Mexican Colonial Cities Heritage
www.mexperience.com/guide/colonial.htm

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Editor's note: This experience is the foundation for a book by Denise Dubé. Called Women on the Verge of Recovery, it covers the lives of women before, during and after a similar wellness retreat.