

RETREATS

Writers' retreats are opportunities for relaxation and writing. Is one right for you?

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by Tom Bentley

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A "writer's retreat" has an old-fashioned kind of sound, bringing to mind a monk, quill in hand, withdrawing to a solitary enclave, or maybe a desert ascetic scribbling in a ragged journal, while the sun beats down on a tin-roofed shack. The fact that I chose Big Sur, California, one of the most stunning spots in all of this fair country, for my own writer's retreat doesn't mean that hunkered-down writing wasn't the focus of the trip. It was. It's just when I took my respites from the page, I had a hundred opportunities to say "wow!"

Choosing the location of your personal writer's retreat is a central question—but understanding your motivation for the retreat in the first place trumps locale. My object was to wake from its slumbers a novel I began three years ago, worked on sporadically, and then left to its own decaying devices for more than a year. Not a word-count goal, but renewed focus. Focus is such a significant issue for writers: writers who can zero in, even for relatively short stretches, can be remarkably productive. A novel is a long march, and ground can be gained in sprints as well, but the key is forward movement. I'd stopped.

Thus, my retreat impetus: remove the distractions of the everyday by removing myself from my everyday—get out of town, get into writing. As for where to, that can be tricky. Big Sur was right on some of the same counts where it was wrong: it's a spectacularly beautiful place, where the hiking is stunning, and where there are many intriguing traveler's pursuits. Is it better to be in a drab place, that tin-roofed shack described above, to really focus? Rationalization or not, my thought was that the inviting diversions, which included lots of exercise, were the perfect counterpart to long stretches at the keyboard. Besides, I could easily drive to Big Sur, so no plane flights, or arriving exhausted from hours at the wheel.

WHERE TO STAY AND HOW TO BEGIN?

I chose to stay in a small cottage, a separate studio of a small, rustic hotel. The cottage was down a little woody road, a distance away from a couple of other cottages. The setting was semi-private, quiet and serene, and not pricy. It had a fridge and stove so I could make some of my own meals. I did want a site with Internet access, because I wanted to get some business e-mail while I was there. But I'd recommend *not* having the Net access; it was a partial distraction for me that didn't have a real upside. My packed essentials were a laptop, a notebook for jotting when I was out and about, and a camera to record both diverting pictures and anything that might upon later reflection provoke writing. Oh, and good chocolate.

So, to business: have a plan. Mine was to settle in, and then immediately take care of some "secretarial" aspects of the novel. I'd brought with me a number of chapters handed out in the writer's workshop I'd been in a while back, marked up with questions and suggestions that I'd never addressed.

My thought was that beginning this way would refresh me with the novel's flow, as well as provoke me, by virtue of my fellow workshopper's questions, to make a number of scene, character and structural changes. Those changes, though small, once again put me in the novel's world in both an artistic and mechanical "fix this" way. It worked! In inputting workshop criticism, you have to take what you can—some criticism can sting, but it can be helpful to recognize critical validity in some suggestions.

I labored in a transfixed state for a few hours, so much so I forgot where I was. I got up to stretch, and walked a short distance down a path to a riverbed not far from the cabin. A discovery! There was a small waterfall with a flowing pool, making me wish I could come up with a spontaneous haiku. But I was pleased enough with the wild lilies scattered about.

I celebrated my keyboard satisfactions at a nearby restaurant. The novel's fresh stimulation was real: I almost felt smug to be taking a bunch of energetic notes on upcoming scenes while at dinner. The retreat frame was being established, with everything in its time: write, stretch, break, eat, walk—the basics. But basics that seem elusive at home.

NEGATIVE IONS ARE POSITIVE

The next day, I took a short beach walk on one of Big Sur's picturesque, craggy beaches, one with a big blowhole that shot waves through in bright, fluffy bursts of whitewater. I wanted the retreat to be truly about writing, so I tried to return my thoughts to the writing process. It's easy to do, staring at the sea, seeing both the regular and irregular rhythms of waves and thinking of them in terms of the rhythms of words, sometimes swelling, sometimes retreating, sometimes cascading forth. And you can get an energy boost just from drinking in the negative ions of the sea.

I was feeling the rejuvenation of the retreat in small bursts. It reminded me of that F. Scott Fitzgerald quote, "My own happiness in the past often approached such an ecstasy that I could not share it even with the person dearest to me, but had to walk it away in quiet streets and lanes with only fragments of it to distill into little lines in books." I felt pushed to produce on the page, but merrily pushed. But I also felt that welcome pressure to not merely produce, but to pay attention to *everything*—don't slack on a single word. This was retreat energy, new to me.

Focus became easier: there's a happiness in crafting a single sentence, an ephemeral feeling, but akin to that Zen sense of a perfect cup of tea. Crafting sentences made me crave a cigar on my cottage deck, more my cup of tea. I was paranoid the organic police of Big Sur would come out of the mountains to shackle me, but I escaped unscathed. Late that night, the moon was up. I kept turning its reflection to my writing reflection: sometimes the words fell like moonbeams, sometimes the moon was dry and distant like the words, which must be seduced. But the retreat channeling—me and the work—made me trust the process.

My third day, I got a lot of new writing done, as well as a lot of loose outlining of scenes for subsequent chapters. I didn't want to leave my cabin without a line of coaches that were going to pull me further into the writing. I feared a post-retreat retreat, away from the writing. No. Even the drive back was an incubation period for the work. Motivation continued to move me forward into the novel, and I give the retreat full credit for that.

Leaving the standard writing confines of my office provided a sense of renewal and freshness, fed by rhythms of writing, thinking, exercising, writing, thinking, exercising Big Sur was perfect: place is important in so many pieces of writing, and so this place was when it was my writing backdrop as well.

But lately, all I've done is *think* about the novel, rather than write it. Lucky for me, Big Sur's only 90 minutes away.



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