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Heard about the cure for stress where you're not allowed to speak?

From book clubs to rambling, the new wellness trend has one common factor: it's conducted in total silence



Silent retreats allow guests to switch off from electronic devices and the stresses of everyday life

SAMADHI

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Desperate to escape the noise of everyday life and the constant lure of screens, a growing number of people are paying to socialise in total silence.

In silent walking groups, ramblers return to their holiday lodgings and dine together without sharing a word about the food. Silent book clubs that allow you “to be socially antisocial together” are also springing up in towns across the country.

Rory Stewart, a former Tory MP and [co-presenter of the podcast \*The Rest Is Politics\*](#), goes on silent retreats for up to 11 days a year and has said that “almost nothing that I’ve done in my life is as meaningful or as transformative as meditation”.

Unlike Quaker, Buddhist and monastic retreats, which have existed for centuries, new silent retreats are no longer tied to a particular religion.

Costing up to £800 per person, they are becoming a popular mini-break option for people in a range of “high-interaction” jobs, according to Jilly Edmundson, who runs the Holistic Coach House in Skipton, North Yorkshire, and are often held in stylish converted barns with modern comforts such as freestanding baths, hairdryers and woodburning stoves.

Three years ago Edmundson was running one annual silent retreat, but now hosts four a year in response to growing demand. They are held in beauty spots including the Lake District, Whalley Abbey in Lancashire and the Broughton Hall estate in North Yorkshire.

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Jilly Edmundson of the Holistic Coach House runs four silent retreats a year after an increase in demand

NOT KNOWN, CLEAR WITH PICTURE DESK

Her clients include teachers, doctors and nurses seeking solace from day-to-day stress. “They want space to be quiet and look inwards and make that connection again with themselves,” she said.

Phones must be turned off and reading books or knitting is discouraged. Family members of guests are given Edmundson’s phone number as an emergency contact. Badges are worn on walks to explain they are on a silent retreat and cannot speak.

A three-night break costs £570 and includes food, hatha yoga, meditation and mindfulness. Guests are in complete silence except during an introduction and first meal, and then for two hours at the end.



Yoga is popular at silent retreats, such as this one in North Wales run by the organisation Samadhi

#### SAMADHI

“Mealtimes can be a bit strange at first. The instructions I send out say not to stare at each other,” Edmundson said.

Karen Podevyn, 42, a healthcare assistant and former police officer, went on a silent retreat run by Edmundson in Lancashire last year.

“I wasn’t sure whether I would be able to make it through because I never shut up and I am used to a busy family life,” she said. “I think a lot of us are frightened of being alone with our thoughts, but it was really powerful.”

Podevyn found it hard not to say “hello” to people but eventually enjoyed being exempt from small talk. “Now I crave silence and have a bit of a daily ritual where I get up in the morning before anybody else and have a drink and sit and meditate. It sets me up for the day — and I don’t look at my phone so often.”

David Oromith founded a charity, Samahdi, that hosts silent meditation retreats, including in Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park, with his husband, Manu, a yoga teacher. “A lot of us are operating on a daily basis from a baseline of stress,” he said. “Silence can be deeply soothing for the nervous system and can help us establish a whole new baseline and mental composure.”

A 2006 study published by the British Medical Journal found that two minutes of silence was more effective in reducing blood pressure and heart rate than listening to relaxing music.

James Jackson, 62, a data analyst, has been on several silent retreats, including on Holy Isle, off the west coast of Scotland. “It helps you reset. You come out feeling completely different,” he said.



A silent retreat was not a success for Fleabag, played by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, right, and her sister Claire, played by Sian Clifford

HAL SHINNIE/TWO BROTHERS PICTURES

Turiya Ma, who runs silent retreats from a converted barn at Exmoor National Park, said some people craved the solitude they had found during almost two years of Covid lockdowns.

Ma, 36, who quit her high-pressure job as a project manager in London to run her business, Dartmoor Rose Therapies, said: “There was a lot of trauma at that time, but for others it gave them a snapshot of a slower way of life. For some it was the first time in their lives they had to be on their own. It gave some people a taste of the quiet, when everything just stopped, and they are intrigued to dive into that.”

Hector Hughes, 30, a former tech executive, was inspired to set up his business of secluded UK cabins, Unplugged, after going on a silent retreat in 2019 in the Himalayas. He has encountered people “from all walks of life” at the retreats, from students to people going through divorces. “Reintegrating in the world is jarring, though,” he said. “You realise just how noisy our lives are.”