The highway toward Route 101 out of Los Angeles was flooded with cars and I drove at a glacial pace, yet instead of feeling frustrated, I was smiling. In fact, I had been smiling ever since I got into my car an hour ago, gleeful at being alone. Writer Insiya Raisina-Finn
If you are a mother of a young child, you may sympathise. I have a two-year-old son and I had not experienced a day or a night off from being with him since he was in my belly. My moments of quietness were snatches, stolen in between naps and after bedtime, swallowed up by life’s mundane, unending to-do lists and the effort to achieve a greater level of efficiency than I had ever experienced in my pre-baby life.

My husband travelled often, but I was my son’s constant, the parent who was always there, and of late I had been feeling dim, as though part of my inner light was fading. It was not just a question of identity, the dissonance of being unsure of who I was, but a mother, who wrote in snatches while her baby napped; a yogini whose practice had dwindled into all too brief twenty minute sessions; and a woman who was so tired, with trying to keep it all together that I had forgotten what it was like to have fun! I didn’t recognise myself, but I did know this: it was time for an intervention.

I decided to sign up for a writing retreat at Esalen Retreat Centre, in Big Sur, California. It would be my solo weekend, both a chance to immerse myself deeper into the craft of writing, as well as to experience some serious R & R.

Esalen has long occupied a mythic place in my reality. Founded in 1962, by two Stanford University graduates, Richard Price and Michael Murphy, Esalen became a mecca for the ‘human potential movement’, which believes that through the development of ‘human potential’ we experience an exceptional quality of life filled with happiness, creativity, and fulfillment.

Esalen is famed for its hot spring baths overlooking the wild Pacific Ocean, delicious, healthy food, and it also happens to be the birthplace of Esalen massage, a body work system known for its revitalising, therapeutic benefits that transcend the physical, which were also part of its appeal.

It was time to go on a trip. Only, it took a while getting there.

I drove for three-and-a-half hours on Thursday night before stopping in San Luis Obispo (SLO) and staying the night at friends. I slept fitfully, wondering how my son was sleeping, whether my husband fed him his dinner on schedule and whether he arrived at Esalen in 1964. Gastall was the first school of psychology that established scientifically that our perception and our understanding of the world is an active, constructive process, deeply conditioned by emotion, expectation, embelishment, relationships and culture. It also pioneered our contemporary understanding that ‘mind, heart, body, spirit and relationship’ are inseparable dimensions of our human experience and evolve (or remain arrested) together. Around the same time, Esalen also hosted Dr Ida Rolf, the founder of Rolfing, who developed and taught her revolutionary and powerful method of body restructuring and realignment known as Rolfing.

The list goes on. Philosophers Joseph Campbell of the sitar musician ‘follow your bliss’ quote inspired and was inspired by Esalen. Dancer Gabrielle Roth honed her 5 Rhythms school of dance on the wood floors of Esalen’s movement spaces, while Joel Kramer, the original yoga teacher at Esalen and one of North America’s first well known yoga teachers in the 60s, penned a book called The Guru Papers, based on his experience while at Esalen, which admonished practitioners not to give away your personal power to your teacher or guru when following a spiritual practice (such as yoga).

Today, Esalen continues to be a crucible known for pushing cultural, intellectual and spiritual boundaries, one that transforms itself with every new age.
Entering an alternate, the looking glass and by families of braying sea lions. Next, a stretch of beach inhabited Bay, a town that sits with clapboard razor sharp beauty. First there was Morro the eye can see. A hairpin bend here, then another, as far as drive. There are a few straight stretches, journey, but if you do, it is an unforgettable vista of empty beaches; rocky coastlines and gnarled trees shaped by the prevailing winds. More turns, more miles, glimpses of the blue grey February ocean, nothing to punctuate its vastness, only a few clouds in the sky. Thunderstorms cleared up as I drove through them until finally, a sign for Calleño Highways 1, Big Sur. I was almost there. Esalen, read the sign. Visitors welcome. “You are early,” said the woman at the gate. “You cannot check into your room until 2pm.” Despite the lukewarm welcome, I decided to enjoy my ‘early’ arrival with lunch and a walk around the property. It was a simple meal, a feast of fresh organic salads, whole grains and fresh fruit. I sat alone on the outdoor patio, warmed by the sun, yet cooled by the Pacific breeze, and I ate slowly, watching the waves hit the cliffs below the winding road, on which I had just driven, and feeling a visceral sense of having accomplished something monumental. It was time to explore. I walked down a path leading past the dining hall, toward the cliff and stood at the edge of the ocean. The ocean is everywhere at Esalen. You can hear its seething sound when the tide is high, you feel its expansive backdrop and you are mesmerised by its wildness. A few hundred metres from the cliff edge is part of Esalen’s four-acre farm. Cultivated following the principles of organic and biodynamic agriculture, the farm produces a large part of the produce that feeds the nearly 250 to 350 people that eat at Esalen each day. In February it was dotted with colourful kale, chard, cabbage, carrots and fennel. I crossed a bridge toward the other side of the property and found a circular gate. “You cannot check into your room through them until finally, a sign for Cabrillo the sky. Thunderstorms cleared up as I drove through them until finally, a sign for Cabrillo the sky. Thunderstorms cleared up as I drove through them until finally, a sign for Cabrillo the sky. Thunderstorms cleared up as I drove through them until finally, a sign for Cabrillo the sky. Thunderstorms cleared up as I drove through them until finally, a sign for Cabrillo the sky. Thunderstorms cleared up as I drove through them until finally, a sign for Cabrillo the sky. Thunderstorms cleared up as I drove through them until finally, a sign for Cabrillo the sky. Thunderstorms cleared up as I drove through them until finally, a sign for Cabrillo the sky. Thunderstorms cleared up as I drove through them until finally, a sign for Cabrillo the sky.
DAY 2

I awoke before the sun and decided to soak up some writing inspiration at the baths, before anyone else got there. I walked in the darkness, shivering in the damp air toward the baths at the north end of the property. There were a few other early risers, including a lady from my writing workshop. We smiled, stripped down and then covering myself with a towel I walked to a stone rimmed tub at the ocean’s edge and slipped in. The water was not as hot as I had expected, which was a relief. I sat, faced the water and looked out onto the horizon. The air was still, the sky turned from dark to light and morning suddenly arrived. There was a sense of wonder that I had not expected, which was a relief. I sat, faced the water and looked out onto the horizon. The air was still, the sky turned from dark to light and morning suddenly arrived. There was something about being in water that I find allows you to feel a sense of place. It was an effort to leave the warm bath and go back to my room, and as my pillow hit my head I was already half asleep. I imagined my roommate and I would meet in the morning.

The baths beckoned many of my classmates after class, but a few steps away was my room, and as my pillow hit my head I was already half asleep. I imagined my roommate and I would meet in the morning.

DAY 3

Predawn was now my waking hour and I walked to the baths again. Some of my classmates had the same idea and soon we took turns stripping down and into the cool night air. As I walked in darkness, I looked up at the cloudless sky and took in the stars. They seemed so near, startling in their brightness. I tiptoed quietly into my room. My mystery roommate, a bubbly, older woman, was asleep. It did not take me long to fall into a dreamless sleep.

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was going through right then, the process of stopping breastfeeding. My son was a voracious feeder and didn't show any signs of wanting to stop, yet I felt that it was done. Everyone I spoke to usually only offered advice. The poem became a way for me to express my feelings and to shed. In a sense, I was uncovering my own truth.

In the afternoon we wrote some more, and that night after a convivial dinner with my classmates, I walked back to the baths. This time to get a massage. Susan, my therapist said I could go and have a soak before it was time. Perhaps it was the darkness, perhaps I was more comfortable, but somehow it didn’t seem to matter whether I was nude or clothed. I immersed myself into a tub and waited.

When it was time, I followed Susan into a private room. There were four massage tables inside, three of which were already taken. The lights were dim and after a short consultation, I slid between the cool sheets on the massage table. I could hear the pounding surf beneath and the inhale and exhale of my own breath. I felt Susan’s hands on my neck, my shoulders and my back, my hamstrings, my hips, all the tight places, and I drifted away into that magical state between sleeping and waking. At the end of my session, I realised there was a tiny pool of drool on my sheet. I was definitely relaxed, but more than that, I felt as though I had released some of the emotional weight I had been carrying over the past months.

It was an effort to leave the warm massage room, to dress and emerge back into the cool night air. As I walked in darkness, I looked up at the cloudless sky and took in the stars. They seemed so near, startling in their brightness. I tiptoed quietly into my room. My mystery roommate, a bubbly, older woman, was asleep. It did not take me long to fall into a dreamless sleep.

Jamu, with its healing concoctions, can address a variety of illnesses, which can be of physical, emotional or spiritual origin. Eco-Insights

I took that morning’s yoga class, a vinyasa flow led by an Australian teacher who lived in the area. Her enthusiasm was infectious, and I moved, breathed and sweated my way to more releases. I ate breakfast with the other mother from my writing class, and we walked over together, wondering what the morning held in store for us.

It was an intense last session. A woman shared her work, a first person account of the death of her husband. Her writing was poignant and unsettling, yet unsentimental and upon hearing her read, I felt the transient nature of life, and how amid the transience, it is our emotions that complicate everything, yet also make it richer.

I had left home only three nights ago but felt deep in my journey. A part of me wanted to stay back for a few more days, while the other was already itching to zip back on the winding ocean-side road toward my husband and baby, who I hoped had missed me just a little over the weekend.