

BUSINESS AND PLEASURE

THE SMART RETREAT COMBINATION

BY KERRY SLAVENS



PETER BAGGIPPIZZERIA, PRIMA STRADA

From adventure outings to culinary excursions, businesses are busting out of the boardroom with corporate retreats that inspire their teams to think about challenges from new perspectives. And Vancouver Island is the perfect place for it.

When it comes to planning corporate retreats, take a page from Apple and “think different.” Paul Drummond, general manager of Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Spa Resort near Parksville, does. Recently, he was approached by a corporate client who, after seeing how popular the resort’s sandcastle competition was with families, wanted to create a sandcastle competition for corporate teams.

No problem, says Drummond, whose event team likes to be challenged to bring new ideas to the corporate sector. Case in point: Tigh-Na-Mara’s Cook like a Chef program, a corporate team-building challenge similar to Top Chef Canada. Each team is provided with its own kitchen and a host of secret ingredients to compete for the winning dish.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Drummond observes that the overriding theme these days is making connections “with each other, with nature or whatever we’re engaged in, and with ourselves.” And corporate retreats

are increasingly being designed to foster those meaningful connections. It’s not that these retreats are all play and no work — Tigh-Na-Mara has 10,000 square feet of meeting space with all the technological accoutrements — but its expansive beachfront, 22 acres of trails and forest, and its spa make it easy to blend business and pleasure. “There are no distractions here — unless you want them!” says Drummond.

Kathy McAree, owner of South-Island-based Travel with Taste, which offers culinary tours and cooking classes to corporate clients, has also observed the power of blending business and pleasure. Whether McAree is hosting foodie walking tours or winery outings, or leading cooking-class excursions to the kitchens of local

Getting beyond the office walls allows people to tackle issues from fresh perspectives.



PHOTO: JEFF BROWN

chefs, she sees how introducing new experiences seems to open people up to innovative ideas.

"I think people are amazed when they see how much you can learn about teamwork in the kitchen," says McAree.

OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE

Along with culinary excursions, adventure retreats are also trending big, according to the U.S. management firm Destination Hotels & Resorts which recently surveyed meeting planners on top getaways ideas.

While ziplining through the treetops might not seem typical for a corporate get-together, it turns out the aerial elements at WildPlay Elements Park in Nanaimo and Westshore are perfect for team building and leveling the playing field, no matter what the participants' corporate rank.

WildPlay recently launched a corporate package that includes team activities such as ice-breaking games, scavenger hunts, and, of course, experiencing WildPlay's ziplines. Nanaimo WildPlay manager Jennifer Doyle, says corporate participants love getting away from the office, out of doors, and taking on fresh experiences that are fun and test their limits.

"There are lots of smiles and laughs and people experiencing things they didn't know they had it in them," she says. "We've had people who say, 'I'm afraid of heights,' but then after they've tried it they are exhilarated. I often hear, 'I really can't believe I did it!'"

Doyle says WildPlay experiences such as the Monkido, a tree-to-tree obstacle course with ziplines and swinging games, tend to encourage teamwork. "You have to work as a group to navigate it," she says.

Meeting in a space without walls is something West Coast Expeditions specializes in. With its Kyuquot base camp on Spring Island, "on the edge of Canada," corporate groups are surrounded by the remote beauty of the Pacific coast. Hosting groups up to 14, West Coast Expeditions specializes in kayak adventures, but it's not all rugged. Co-owner and manager Dave Pinel describes the experience as "glamping," complete with hot showers, gourmet meals, and all-weather meeting spaces. "It's an opportunity to experience each other in a new setting," says Pinel, "and to encounter a part of Canada rarely seen."

Pinel says remote retreats present opportunities to get away from the wired world

PLANNING TIP

"Ask the people who coordinate corporate outings what has worked well in the past," suggests Kathy McAree. "It's easy to get a preconceived idea of what you think will appeal to people, but those who organize retreats and tours tend to know from experience."



Retreat Icebreakers

The first hour of your retreat will set the culture and tone for the entire rest of your outing. Instead of opening with a speech or jumping right into the work at hand, why not **start with an icebreaker** to put everyone at ease and help pull down barriers? Here are some well-tested icebreakers of less than 30 minutes each.

1 THREE IN COMMON

Groups of 3 to 5

Your goal is to find 3 things your group has in common with one another. Omit obvious things like sex, hair colour, skin colour, age, clothing etc. Instead, find unusual points of connection such as favourite books, movies, hobbies, and people in common. Allow 10 minutes for discussion and 5 minutes for groups to present their results.

2 TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

Unlimited participants

Everyone comes up with two truths about themselves and one lie — and everyone has to guess which one is the lie. Example: 1) I met the Queen 2) I have 500 Archie comics 3) I rode a camel across Australia. This game is great for getting the group laughing and connecting.

3 CHANGE PLACES

Unlimited participants

Write down three challenges your organization wants to solve, then ask group members to put their names into a container. Have everyone draw a card other than their own. When generating or responding to ideas, ask participants to assume the professional job description of the person on their card and try to respond from that point of view. This approach creates empathy between group members; emphasize that it is not a mimicry exercise.

Get out of the office and into a space different from work and home and ... no flip charts.

and have meaningful conversations we seldom have in the work environment. "It's refreshing and a chance to recharge batteries," he adds.

At Milagro Retreats, an Island-based collective, corporate retreats might include eco-adventures, yoga, paddle boarding, or surfing. While Milagro's scope is international, many of its Island retreats are held in Tofino. Milagro's Shani Cranston says healthful food is an increasingly big draw and Milagro specializes in gluten-free and vegan diets with fresh, Island-grown foods. The focus on healthy food is not only a retreat incentive, it also keeps your team nourished with brain foods instead of sugary snacks to improve the quality of your time together.

THE SOFTER SIDE

If adventure tours and surfing are not quite what you had in mind, consider adding time at one of Vancouver Island's world-class spas to your retreat schedule. Angela Rafuse-Tahir, director of sales and marketing at the Fairmont Empress

and Willow Stream Spa, says the hotel has seen a significant increase in corporate clients interested in wellness.

As Rafuse-Tahir points out, studies show employees are no longer driven strictly by monetary compensation, so spa retreats act as ideal wellness incentives. Willow Stream's spa sales and marketing manager works with corporate clients to customize programs that meet the needs of particular businesses, from law firms to tech companies.

OUT OF THE BOX

Choosing a creative corporate retreat is a great way to introduce new ways of thinking into your corporate culture. By getting your team out of the office, you are literally taking them out of the box — and that opens doors to new ideas, stronger team relationships, and a more robust corporate culture. When a retreat is done right, everyone wins and comes back to the office feeling refreshed and ready to take on the world.

Set the stage for a successful retreat

Create a diversity of experiences whenever possible, especially if your activities involve adventure outings. Not everyone can or will participate in strenuous physical activities. Invite active participation.

Everyone processes information differently. For example, some people are introverts who value alone-time to process their ideas, so include a small amount of personal time in your schedule.

Just as you want to start a retreat on a high note, you want to leave with a group that feels empowered and ready to take on the challenges ahead. At the finale of your retreat, leave an hour for a recap and summary and time to create action items.

If there's no time for a multi-day retreat, mini-retreats can be great for team building. An afternoon on the golf green, at the spa, or just going offsite to a beautiful meeting location is great for team chemistry and idea generation.

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