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Esquire

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THE ENLIGHTENED TRAVELER

Mind Trips in Big Sur



Equilibrium: It's how you stand in this world. It's hard to maintain. But there is a way to get your bearings, a way to achieve a kind of harmony within. It is the Big Sur Wilderness Experience.

The Big Sur program is led by a young man filled with the enthusiasm of the convinced. His name is Steven Harper, and it's his notion that in our ultracivilized way of life we let many of our valuable natural instincts sleep. By allowing ourselves to become aware of nature and of our place in it as human beings, we can release those instincts to add new depth to our lives.

This spring Harper's Wilderness Experience will run from April 10 to 15. Participants lodge at the Esalen Institute, under whose auspices this program is run. The workshop consists of four daylong hikes, each four to ten miles. Harper leads his askew balance-seekers into the Ventana Wilderness, a deep and tall spread of ferns and redwoods lying between the Pacific and the coastal ridge of the Santa Lucia mountains. Through the Wilderness Act, the federal government is the area's perpetual guardian, and state parks and beaches have been created within the boundaries of Big Sur. The days are divided between walking and studying, with a break for a lunch of

bread, cheese, and fruit. Though Harper makes a day plan, he says he uses it only as an outline—much as a dancer improvises on a score—and he departs from and returns to it at will.

IMPROVISATIONAL HIKING

One of Harper's primary concerns is to teach his trekkers the skills to make independent hiking journeys. So he teaches them how to use maps and compasses, what to carry in a backpack, methods of layering clothes to suit weather conditions, and physical maintenance (for example, how to avoid blisters and what to do about the unavoidable ones). He also passes on basic information about weather systems, ecology, and geology.

The purpose of the experience, Harper asserts, is not to encourage a retreat to nature in the sense of longing for a bygone pastoral world. Rather, he hopes participants will reclaim qualities that they haven't really lost but that have gone unacknowledged. And with a more complete sense of self-sufficiency and resourcefulness, they can approach everyday life with renewed vigor.

When the day's hiking is done, Harper and the group return to Esalen for dinner; the meals are largely vegetarian. Harper plans some stretching routines and more map and

compass instruction, but the object now is relaxation. Yoga classes and a massage crew are available to everyone at Esalen, though they're not specifically required for the Wilderness Experience.

HOT TUBS WITH A VIEW

According to many an eyewitness, Big Sur is one of the most spectacular places on earth. Esalen is no mean shakes either—the grounds are quietly and gracefully landscaped. The Institute is fitted out with six hot tubs, two of them sitting outdoors on a cliff fifty vertical feet above the ocean. The tubs are, in fact,

one of the most salient and enjoyable features of the complex at Big Sur. Just the thought of soaking near the sky while the setting sun reflects off the Pacific is enough to give anyone's natural rhythms a buzz.

The Big Sur Wilderness Experience attracts an older crowd than most outdoor programs do. Most participants are in their late twenties to early fifties and are likely to be professionals. The total cost of your five days at the heart and pulse of nature is \$390. That's a lot of rhythm. For the Esalen spring catalog write: Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California 93920. Tel.: 408-667-2335. ●