

Eat Pray Love Canadian Style 9 ways to expand your culinary, spiritual and love horizons without leaving the country

BY REB STEVENSON, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN AUGUST 14, 2010 BE THE FIRST TO POST A COMMENT

STORY PHOTOS (1)



Northern Edge Algonquin is an eco-resort in Ontario that combines yoga with sea kayaking at its 'Quest for Balance' retreat. Photograph by: Image courtesy, Peter Mealin

Eating. Praying. Loving. Incredibly common acts, if you really think about it. But eating, praying, and loving in three exotic locales? For most people that's an otherworldly scenario reserved only for Julia Roberts and her trusty sidekick, Hollywood.

In the bestselling memoir Eat Pray Love, author Elizabeth Gilbert did a pretty good job of hyping up the notion that depression and bad relationships can be conquered by spiriting oneself away to a trifecta of inspiring countries.

But just you wait until you lay your eyes upon the delicious, sun-soaked film (which opened yesterday). It brings the beauty of Italy, India and Indonesia to life in radiant colour. Furthermore, it makes the self-help section at Chapters look mighty shoddy -- you're going to want to book an appointment with your new therapist (the world) posthaste.

Unfortunately, many of us haven't the time or the funds to embark upon a year of international introspection. With that in mind, here are some alternative choices inspired by Gilbert's theme. Let this odyssey be called: Eat Pray Love Canada.

EAT

Original version:

Gilbert goes to Rome and gorges on gelato, pizza and Italian words. She buys sexy lingerie despite her expanding waistline, but does not indulge in any nooky.

Canadian versions:

1. Sure, Tuscany is beautiful and all, but Prince Edward Island's got its own rural charms what with the red soil, quaint lighthouses and green farmlands (we're not mentioning you-know-who in this story, her fiery noggin has had enough press).

While the land begets 23 types of vegetables, the sea sustains some 1,300 licensed lobster fishermen. To sink your teeth into the abundance, hit the island's Fall Flavours Festival. The event (www.fallflavors.ca; 1-877-445-4849), which runs Sept. 3 to 30, invites visitors to comb the island, choosing from more than 250 culinary events.

Pick potatoes with locals, catch lobsters or dig up your own clams, and don't forget the most important part: throwing 'em down the hatch.

2. The book isn't preoccupied with pretentious food -- it simply makes a case for savouring rich flavours with wild abandon. The short courses at Ottawa's Le Cordon Bleu (613-236-2433; www.lcbottawa.com) will get your mouth acquainted with some of those so-called "sinful" dishes, and -- better yet -- you'll learn how to make them in your own home for evermore. Hardcore Eat Pray Love addicts can do the Italian thing on Nov. 27 (\$245), while basic chocoholics might gravitate to the Tasty Treats workshop on Nov. 20 (\$245).

3. A church basement in small-town Manitoba probably isn't tops on your "must dine" list. But hello, isn't this a voyage of discovery? Be brave, people.

Clarification: you can't go to the church basement any old time (unless you plan to feast on cobwebs and rotting hymn books). What you're looking for is a bona fide fall supper (for a full list, call 1-800-665-0040).

"They're very authentic, and by that I mean it's mostly local people who go to them," says Catherine Senecal, spokesperson for Travel Manitoba.

Throughout the autumn months, dozens of Manitoban towns host these splendid buffets in community centres and the like.

For about \$10, you can cram your belly full of home-cooked fare such as turkey, ham, pork loin, fresh-baked rolls, locally grown produce and fruity pies. Depending on where you end up, the supper may have Ukrainian, French-Canadian or Mennonite influences (think sweet-and-sour meatballs, pierogies, cabbage rolls and sugar pie).

Because the suppers are staggered throughout the fall, you don't have to settle for just one.

"In one weekend, you could probably hit three or four," says Senecal.

PRAY

Original version:

Gilbert tries to mute her inner chatterbox/worrywart while meditating at an ashram in a remote part of India. She remains celibate. Well, OK, she does make out with a tree but it's not very racy.

Canadian versions:

1. For an ashram experience resembling Gilbert's, try the three-month Yoga Development Course at Yasodhara Ashram (www.yasodhara.org; 1-800-661-8711) in B.C.'s Kootenay region. The course runs from Jan. 8 to April 8 (\$7,100, inclusive) and dares you to ask the big question: "What is life all about?"

Like the community in Eat Pray Love, Yasodhara is headed by a woman, Swami Radhananda.

"Ashram" means "spiritual home," and staying at one is total immersion in a dedicated yoga practice. Don't bother looking for the rum punches and discotheque -- an ashram is far from a party-time resort.

Accommodations are shared, meals are vegetarian and participants are expected to attend all the components of their retreat (yoga classes, workshops, chanting, and so on).

If three months seem too intense, Yasodhara offers shorter retreats, including programs exclusively for families, men, women and young adults.

2. "Boat pose" takes on a whole new meaning at Northern Edge:

Algonquin (www.northernegealgonquin.com; 1-800-953-3343), an eco-retreat centre set on Kawawaymog Lake in Algonquin Park: Its popular four-day Quest for Balance retreat combines yoga and sea kayaking (from \$680, inclusive).

"The core focus of this place is reconnecting with nature and in some way being re-inspired about who we are, what our gifts are, and why we're on this planet," says co-founder Todd Lucier.

Lucier says that paddling softly in the tranquil setting is a reminder that we are part of a magnificent cast of creatures on a global stage.

"Nature in Algonquin Park is like an outdoor cathedral," he says.

3. If your religious garment of choice is the bathrobe, Grail Springs Spa in Bancroft, Ont., (www.grailsprings.com; 1-877-553-5772) might be your path to greater spirituality. In addition to detoxing, meditating, exercising and life-planning, the 21-night Life Mastery Retreat (from \$6,372, inclusive) exposes pampered inmates to what seems like a lifetime's worth of spa appointments, as well as a private class on holistic nutrition and cooking.

LOVE

Original version:

Gilbert hangs out with a Balinese medicine man who, between pleas for more western followers, introduces her to Balinese traditions and treatments. She is later introduced to Felipe, a fiftysomething Brazilian Prince Charming who offers his own bodywork -- in bed. Buh-bye celibacy.

Canadian versions:

1. Part of the thrill of reading or watching Eat Pray Love (or any romance, for that matter), is feeding off the protagonist's romantic sparks. If the story leaves you thinking your existing relationship looks more like a smoldering ember buried under a pile of ashes than a fireworks display, consider a couple's retreat at Holyhock:

Educational Retreat Centre on Cortes Island, B.C. (www.holyhock.ca; 1-800-933-6339).

Just the act of staying in Holyhock's oceanside rooms might be a treat for you and your partner, but intensive workshops like Deepening Your Love, Sharing the Path and The Spiritual Pathways of Same-Sex Love aim to examine your issues and create deeper bonds than you thought possible.

2. Ever wish you could go back to Sex Ed as an adult, minus the awkward teacher, the snickering bully in the corner and the embarrassment about your own body?

Pala Copeland, a tantric sex educator, invites women to shed all the shame, uncertainty and frustration that many have accumulated over their lives at her Awakening Your Goddess Workshop in Orangeville, Ont. from Oct. 1 to 3 (www.tantra-sex.com/tantraforwomen; 1-800-684-5308; \$550, inclusive).

Copeland says that sexuality and spirituality are often -- and wrongly -- viewed as mutually exclusive.

"Whether you're alone or with a partner, awakening your sexual self is physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy," says Copeland.

There is a focus on becoming more orgasmic and coming to terms with body image issues.

"Once we love our bodies and we're comfortable with our bodies, our bodies will let us experience extraordinary sexual pleasure," she says.

The retreat uses body movement, loving body discovery, clay sculpture and sacred ceremonies to help shed societal baggage.

It's normal to be nervous about getting up close and personal about your sexuality with a group of strangers, admits Copeland. But there's no nudity and nobody is forced to share anything. "There's lots of laughter and often tears. Big personal awareness happens and it's in a comfortable, trusting environment of confidentiality."

3. Looking for a "happily ever after ending" to your own story? Meet Market Adventures (www.meetmarketadventures.com; 1-416-203-3434) organizes singles' activities in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Calgary, Winnipeg, Edmonton and Vancouver. Instead of the "job interview" feeling you get from speed dating, you can canoe to Toronto Island (\$39.99), spend an evening at The Vancouver Art Gallery (\$19.99) or go skydiving in Montreal (\$99.95) with a pack of enthusiastic singles. To really do it the Eat, Pray, Love way, you have to get out of your own city and fall for a foreigner (an Alberta-based, for instance).

Reb Stevenson is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

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