

# MASTER THE ART OF ESCAPISM

Create your own at-home retreat to give your mind and body a holiday.

Alice Wilkinson finds out how

Can you remember that holiday feeling? Let me jog your memory. It's when – whether you're perched on a wall in the Yorkshire Dales or lying on a beach on a Greek island – you feel a moment of utter release, a deep breath that signifies the total relaxation that comes after leaving the stresses of day-to-day life behind. If you remember this blissful feeling, you don't need scientific research to tell you that it is good for you. But, with the elusive holiday feeling harder to come by than it once was, you might want to listen to the scientific research telling you that you can recreate that restful holiday feeling (and the health benefits that come with it) at home.

"It all comes down to how our minds work," says Kate Megase, a psychotherapist and member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Embracing escapism or creating what psychologists call a sense of 'being away', even at home, can help if you're feeling isolated, lonely, overwhelmed or worried about the future, she says.

"You have up to 7,000 thoughts a day and, as much as you try, you really can't control what your mind focuses on, so it's easy to overthink. We are programmed that way. That's why you can spend anything from a minute to a week worrying about the same thing. But when, say, you're watching a film or immersed in a book, you're distracting your mind from these unhelpful thoughts, giving your brain a much-needed break."

“Creating a sense of ‘being away’ can help if you’re feeling lonely or worried”



## WELL-READ

The fact that research by Mindlab and the University of Sussex found that reading silently for six minutes can reduce stress levels, slow your heart rate and ease muscle tension is evidence enough that it's helping you unwind. But when you're looking to create a real sense of escape, what type of books should you be reading? It's a question that Ella Berthoud, a bibliotherapist at the School of Life ([theschooloflife.com](http://theschooloflife.com)) and author of *The Art of Mindful Reading*, has been exploring with her clients. She says it really depends on the type of reader you are.

"Fantasy and science fiction will take you away from reality to a world where mermaids exist, while historical fiction is still set in the real world but you can escape to a different era." (See right for Ella's recommendations.)

"Reading has been a means to travel when we haven't been able to travel and a way of connecting people when we've found it hard to stay connected," she adds.

## ON THE BOX

If you're unable to go further afield, watching a film that promises a beautiful display of scenery is the next best thing. Research published in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that you can experience some of the same restorative benefits after watching films that show natural scenes as you will after physically spending time in nature. *The Lord of the Rings* is known for its epic setting, showing New Zealand's landscape at its finest, while *The Sound of Music* will give you a musical tour of Austria's idyllic countryside.

## ESCAPE ARTIST

When you engage in a creative pursuit such as knitting, sewing or crocheting, you're in the present moment and practising mindfulness, giving the part of your brain that deals with perceived threat and fear (your amygdala) a holiday. The repetitive nature of these crafts means they feel meditative, but they're beneficial in the long term, too. They reduce your risk of dementia by encouraging cognitive flexibility – you have to consider multiple concepts (the colours, overall pattern, precise movement of the stitch) all at once.

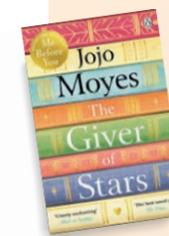


## THE PATH NOT TAKEN

Add a sense of escape to your daily stroll by turning it into an 'awe walk'. This requires a little effort to really tune in to the birdsong you hear and the colours you see – you can even reach out and gently touch the trees you pass. A study in the journal *Emotion* looked at older adults who took weekly 15-minute awe walks for eight weeks. They reported increased positive emotions and less distress in their daily lives.

## FIND YOUR PASSION

Creating a sense of escape at home should be as much fun as going on holiday. "It's about finding what you're passionate about," says Kate. "Whatever helps you switch off – be it crafting, board games, reading, or immersing yourself in a film – finding it will help you with your sense of identity and build your self-esteem." Here lies an opportunity for self-discovery.



### *The Giver of Stars*

by Jojo Moyes  
(Penguin Books)

"A heart-warming story of a woman who, as an escape from a dull marriage, joins the packhorse librarians as they journey through the Kentucky mountains."

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*Piranesi*  
by Susanna Clarke (Bloomsbury)  
"A calming, soothing, surprising book set in a fantasy parallel world. This book is unlike any you will have read before," says Ella.



### *Miss Benson's Beetle*

by Rachel Joyce (Transworld)  
"A woman travels from her home in 1950s London to the other side of the world in search of a beetle that may not exist, with a very unlikely travel companion," says Ella.

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Find more recommendations in *The Novel Cure* by Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin (Cannongate).

