

# have retreat will travel

how to take your Pilates show  
on the road **BY TANNIS KOBRINSKY**

**C**ongratulations, you've finally made it as a Pilates instructor! Your studio is thriving, or maybe you're an in-demand independent instructor. Perhaps you've got a DVD, a book or other products in the marketplace and have developed a loyal following. It may be time to broaden your horizons by taking your skills on the road. That's what I did several years ago, and my practice and career have flourished as a result.

In February 2002 I emailed fitness-oriented wellness centers and proposed teaching a Pilates retreat. With my BASI Pilates certification, I had a successful career teaching group mat and Reformer classes, as well as privates at studios, but I kept hearing about yoga retreats in exotic places and figured there must be interest in Pilates retreats.

Turns out that Pura Vida Spa in Costa Rica thought so, too. I told my Los Angeles students about a retreat that would cost \$1,700 and include a double-occupancy room; a mix of standing core work, partner stretch, Pilates basics, a Gyrokinesis intro, a Pilates clinic, pool Pilates; plus three eco-adventures of their choice, such as zip-lining through the jungle canopy, white-water rafting, relaxing at famous beaches; healthy gourmet meals and access to spa treatments. (The price didn't include airfare, but Pura Vida would handle all transportation within Costa Rica.)

To my surprise, 20 students were seri-

ously interested. So I registered a d/b/a (doing business as) called Health Habitravels with the City of Los Angeles and acquired a business license for a teacher who travels. (See "Retreats 101," page 84, for more technical advice.) I launched a web site to globally advertise this first retreat for my new company and paid Pura Vida the \$350 it required to reserve a week. In February 2003 six students actually followed through and accompanied me. Pura Vida paid for my stay and a commission of \$500 per participant. I taught two classes a day and enjoyed the wonderful country with my students. At week's end, one student asked, "Do I really have to go back to L.A.?" Another one wanted to know where I was holding my next retreat, so as soon as I got home, I began planning the next one.

Since then, I've held 12 retreats, some in California, others in Costa Rica, Mexico, South

America and Italy, with as few as four and as many as 15 participants. There have been magical moments and sleepless nights. I've worked endless hours organizing programs from start to finish; other times the host venue handled the logistics and I just showed up to teach. I've covered my expenses and made money, but best of all I've grown



Costa Rica  
retreat group  
waterfall trek  
(2005)

immeasurably as a teacher and a person, learning about other cultures and working with every level of student, from novice to budding instructor to seasoned pro.

“Retreats are career boosters,” says Alycea Ungaro, who owns Real Pilates Studio in New York City and leads retreats for Amangani Resort in Wyoming and the Cliff House in Maine. “The wider you cast your net, the more likely you are to promote yourself. Making new personal and professional contacts can lead to almost anything.”

Nancy Meyers and Tracey Sullivan, owners of an Ellie Herman Studio in San Francisco, organize all aspects of their retreats. “The biggest gift from all the

work involved,” says Meyers, “is meeting people from all over the world, sharing ideas and having a great experience.”

## taking care of business

Feel like you’re ready to take *your* show on the road? Let’s do a reality check to make sure you’re up to the task(s). First comes determining whether you can afford to go the retreat route. You’ll have to take time off from your day job, which means missed paychecks or hiring someone to step in. “I budget the cost to cover what I’d miss teaching at home and yield additional earnings,” says Sarah Rosenfield, owner of Sarah Pilates in London, England, whose retreat locales include a 19th-century manor house in Burgundy, a farmhouse in Tuscany and a safari lodge in South Africa.

A second and vital step is to contact your insurance agency to find out what you’ll need in case of accident or injury. “I didn’t have extra coverage when I was teaching at one place,” says Siri Galliano of Live Art Pilates Studio in Los Angeles. “When we scratched up an elevator wall, they tried to charge us \$2,000. But until I saw them lower the equipment by rope from the balcony of the second floor, I didn’t realize just how dangerous it could have been.”

“I have insurance up the wazoo,” says Karen Sanzo of Pilates Unlimited in Dallas, a regular guest presenter at Rancho La Puerta in Baja, CA, in Mexico. “I’ve got teacher-liability insurance and ‘teacher-touch insurance.’ You can do a helpful hands-on assist on 500 people and then have a real problem with number 501.”

Then there’s the cost of marketing. Ungaro, Galliano, Meyers and Sullivan start promoting six months in advance. Rosenfield and I promote one year ahead. But everyone agrees that you get more results by word of mouth, flyers, email blasts, newsletters, web site postings and press exposure than by costly print ads. Says Ungaro, “Make sure the facility you’re working with generates its own mailing list of past participants to promote you—and then talk to anyone with ears on their head about your event.”

## DIY getaways

Of course, most of the work will fall on you. Become an ardent researcher and check into fitness locations that will work with you. Galliano masterminds her three-day intensives at Northwoods Resort in the woody forest of Big Bear Lake in California. An in-demand

## retreats 101: what you need to know

**certifications:** Current Pilates and CPR  
**business license:** Venues don’t require you to have a business license, but if you have one, you can write your expenses off. Studio owners can use their studio business license. Independent instructors can establish a d/b/a (doing business as) and obtain a license as a teacher who travels.

**insurance:** The host venue’s insurance typically covers guests, but it’s wise to carry personal liability. The venue where you teach can be added to your standard liability policy as an additional insured entity. Insurance providers offer this option. Check with Fitness and Wellness Insurance Agency ([fitnessandwellness.com](http://fitnessandwellness.com)) or CM Meiers Insurance ([cmmeirs.com](http://cmmeirs.com)).

**release forms:** Venues normally have guests sign release forms. Beyond that, you should ask participants to sign one you provide. Standard Pilates studio client release forms suffice. If you’re the entity putting together the whole shebang, you have more at risk, so consider hiring a lawyer to draft this document.



Costa Rica zip-line excursion (2003)



Locanda del Gallo  
group cooking class  
(2006)



presenter at conferences where large classes are the rule, the longtime instructor is passionate about what students can learn at small retreats. “Nothing’s better than exercising in all that pure air, and the retreat intimacy makes it possible to eliminate rules that big conferences have, such as no photo-taking or recording of classes,” she says. “Students can change classes or bring their families along and have their husbands watch their kids—they can even nurse their babies during classes.”

Galliano also offers luxury retreats for those who can afford the best. “A retreat doesn’t have to be for 100 teachers or 33,” she notes. “You and a client can travel to Hawaii or St. Moritz and train intensely while getting away from outside pressures.”

Rosenfield prefers small inns, such as El Castell in Mallorca, for their casual

environment. “Spas are busy and regimental,” she observes. “The places I use are relaxed and cater to smaller groups.” Tracey Sullivan likes the intimacy of smaller places that allow for events that encourage student camaraderie. “Our retreats are like Bohemian eco-adventures,” she says. “This April at Kolealea Retreat Center on Maui we’re doing some of the cooking ourselves. We each get one towel for the week. We aren’t scheduled all day with classes and treatments, which is typical of a spa week. We teach class twice a day.”

## DI-not-Y getaways

For some people, though, bigger is better. Many instructors prefer to teach at retreat centers or spas that host their own Pilates week. These events entail working in a structured environment,

but you will be surrounded by staff employees who often lend needed support. Teaching responsibilities and compensation vary from spa to spa, but most will cover your accommodations and allow you to sell your Pilates-related merchandise. Spas often prefer studio owners and well-known names in the Pilates industry, but not exclusively.

And then there are the intangibles. To teach a retreat at Sagrada Wellness in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, for example, you must fit in. “An ideal Sagrada instructor is congenial and available to participants 12 hours a day,” says co-owner Scott Currie, also the center’s architect. “We comp the instructor’s room and board when at least four students sign up for a week. Teachers add a fee on top of what we charge that ranges from \$60 to \$120 per participant per day to teach from two to three hours a day.”

## great places to spread your wings

### Cal-a-Vie, Vista, CA

**requirements:** well-known instructors with their own studios

**contact:** Leslie White, director of fitness: 760-945-2055, ext. 263; lwhite@cal-a-vie.com

### Chiva Som, Thailand

**requirements:** instructors with extensive work experience. On-staff instructors are Polestar-certified. Visiting consultants own studios overseas and are teacher trainers.

**contact:** Anthony Perillo, health and wellness director: anthony.perillo@chivasom.com

### Golden Door, Escondido, CA

**requirements:** extensive Pilates experience; a well-known name in the industry; DVDs in the marketplace a plus

**contact:** Trish Martin, fitness director: 760-744-5777; ttrupiano@goldendoor.com



Sagrada

### La Serrenia, Mallorca, Spain

**contact:** Tim Pennell, retreat management; retreats@laserrenia.com

### Locanda del Gallo, Umbria, Italy

**contact:** Paola Moro, proprietor: info@locandadelgallo.it

### Matilija Ranch, Ojai, CA

**contact:** info@thedenthouse.com

### Om Retreats, Costa Rica

**contact:** Alice Burns, co-owner: 646-233-3234; alice@omretreats.com

### The Pickford House, Cambria, CA

**contact:** 888-270-8470; innkeeper@thepickfordhouse.com



Locanda del Gallo

### Rancho La Puerta, Baja California, Mexico

**requirements:** college degrees related to field of expertise being taught; certifications and established practices; must have at least 10 years' experience

**contact:** Barry Shingle, director of fitness: 800-443-7565 (U.S.); 858-764-5500 (worldwide); bshingle@rancholapuerta.com

### Sagrada Wellness, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

**contact:** Scott and Eva Currie, owners: 323-924-5950; info@sagradawellness.com



The Dent House

Policies also differ from place to place. Some set fees and others require you to negotiate up front. Issues that come up range from how much deposit is required (and when) to what you receive from the host in terms of rooms, meals, drinks, etc.

At Om Retreats in Costa Rica, instructors teach two classes daily. "We cover their airfare, accommodations and meals," says co-owner Alice Burns. "They also earn a fee, based on the retreat profits. We provide all marketing materials and advertise on our web site and others'. We don't require insurance or a business license; in fact, we're putting together a waiver for folks to sign." At the other end of the spectrum are private properties such as B&Bs, estates, ranches and villas, which are available for group rental. I've conducted Health Habitravels retreats at Matilija Ranch in Ojai and the Pickford House Inn in Cambria, CA, and each time, I've been responsible for marketing, hiring caterers and organizing activities, which worked out but added a lot of stress.

## taking care of everyone else

Once you've got the business end of your retreat plans down, there is another equally important part that merits consideration. As a Pilates instructor, you nurture your clients and then go home at the end of the day and get on with the rest of your life. Not so on your own retreat—you must be savvy, capable and ready to handle mishaps 24/7. This undertaking is not for the nervous.

Rosenfield, who worked as a large-event planner prior to becoming an instructor, says, "Some Pilates teachers are purely teachers. Leading retreats isn't easy. There are many things to consider: travel arrangements, meals, roommate assignments. I take great care of details beforehand, such as finding and reserving an inn, making sure meals are nutritious and well-presented and coordinating flight arrivals

and transfers.” But the biggest challenges, she says, come *during* the retreat. “You have to help group members deal with whatever comes up, from emotions to an unexpected accident or illness. You cannot switch off. Only do retreats if you’re prepared for this.”

If this sounds like your worst nightmare, you might think about becoming a guest presenter, since you’d only be responsible for students during your working shift. The venue will most likely have staff members to attend to emergencies. In other words, you’ll have a working vacation. “At Cal-a-Vie I teach 7:30 and 9 a.m. classes, a daily group Reformer class and a workshop for the Pilates staff,” says Pilates guru Mari Winsor. “When I’m home in Los Angeles I deal with lots of pressure. But when I’m teaching at Cal-a-Vie, I can relax. I get more inventive as a teacher.”

Echoing Winsor’s sentiments, Lynne Robinson, founder of Body Control Pilates, headquartered in London, guest-teaches regularly at Samas Spa in Ireland and Chiva Som in Thailand. “It never ceases to amaze me how good I feel after even a short weekend retreat. The glow far outweighs the financial benefits.”

It’s no simple task to run a retreat or even teach at a preorganized one, but the benefits are deep. “The satisfaction is seeing clients progress from the beginning to end of a retreat,” says Rosenfield. “I enjoy knowing that I’ve touched and changed somebody’s life physically and emotionally.”

For me, too, the human interaction has been the most enriching. It’s rewarding to help people learn more about Pilates and themselves. In return, I learn from them and discover more about myself.

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