

Profiting From Fitness Retreats

by Megan Senger



Profit Center: Organize moneymaking workout getaways to increase client satisfaction.

Have you ever dreamed of taking your clients on a fitness retreat to Mexico? Or a weekend of hiking in your local mountains? Maybe you've imagined leading an introspective Pilates retreat, a five-star motivational weekend or an energizing boot-camp getaway?

Being paid to travel by leading client fitness retreats in beautiful, exotic locations certainly sounds like a fabulous way to make money—and infuse excitement into your clients' fitness regimes. Yet, while you may love leading exercise sessions, organizing the nuts and bolts of a group travel experience may seem daunting at first glance.

With proper planning, however, a fitness getaway can become an additional profit center, provide an extra-value service to your clients, set you apart from the competition and, of course, allow you to travel both locally and abroad. Discover how different fitness professionals plan, market and conduct client retreats—and make certain they're not just for fun, but also for profit.

Planning for Profit

To ensure your event is a moneymaker, start by writing a detailed plan for all components of your retreat, advises Sherri McMillan, MSc, who leads active, adventure-style getaways to destinations like the Grand Canyon. McMillan, a former IDEA Personal Trainer of the Year and IDEA Program Director of the Year, owns Northwest Personal Training in Portland, Oregon, and Vancouver, Washington, and Northwest Women's Fitness Club in Vancouver.

To begin planning, first determine why your clients will join you and how location will affect your bottom line.

Reasons for Going to a Retreat. The 2008 *Yoga Journal* "Yoga in America Market Study" showed that practitioners spend \$630 million per year—11.25% of total yoga-related spending—on yoga-based retreats and vacations. But can the success of these events cross over to getaways led by personal trainers or exercise entrepreneurs?

"This is absolutely something that can translate into the fitness world," says Jillian Pransky, a yoga instructor with 11 years' experience leading retreats. After a decade of working as a personal trainer, she dedicated herself to yoga and is now based in New York and New Jersey as national director of restorative yoga teacher training for YogaWorks and Bright Spirit Yoga. Pransky, who created the guided-meditation CD *Relaxmore*, has led over 30 yoga getaways to regional venues like the Berkshire mountains in Massachusetts, as well as longer trips to Mexico. She notes that a potential participant will consider four key points—in addition to cost—before making a buying decision:

- Is the personal trainer someone I want to spend time with on vacation?
- Is the location somewhere desirable and easy to get to?
- Are there other people "like me" on the trip?
- Will I come home somehow transformed or "better"?

To ensure the success of your group getaway, keep these questions in mind as you plan and promote your retreat.

Length of Retreat. The duration of your event should work within the budgets and schedules of your target clientele. "Our retreats are about 4–5 days long," says McMillan. "That's long enough to see amazing things, but not so long that it would be difficult for people to commit to."

For your first retreats, consider starting out with shorter trips that are also close to home. They're easier to handle from both a business and programming perspective, says Pransky. "Unless you actually have a solid following and a way to market to [those people], stick with a weekend trip until you build up more of a base," she advises.

Location of Retreat. When choosing a place to conduct a retreat, "look at all the properties you are considering," says Pransky. "Don't find a place on the Web and book it without going yourself or getting references firsthand."

Todd Durkin, MA, who has led mind-body- and health-centered retreats to regional luxury resorts, agrees: "You need to feel the energy of a location yourself and see firsthand what you want to have your clients experience." Durkin, owner of Fitness Quest 10 in San Diego and author of *The Impact! Body Plan* (Rodale 2010), adds, "If you plan on workouts, see the outdoor options as well as room options for yoga, meditations and group fitness." He also inspects the guest rooms and tastes the venue's food before making a final decision.

Calculating Costs

Once you have figured out how to conduct a retreat, how do you make money from it?

Start by listing the anticipated expenses of your event, outlining what you will (and won't) include in your price. Next, calculate how many clients you need to break even. "Be sure to cover your costs, and then mark [them] up based on covering your time away from work and any expenses you may incur," says McMillan.

Consider, too, that many retreat expenses are hidden. For example, Pransky takes into account the costs of rooming, food, equipment, snacks, marketing, gratuities and even payment for a babysitter while she is away. She also advises researching comparable trip offerings to ensure you have priced your retreat competitively.

Finally, Durkin reminds you always to "allow for about 10% extra for miscellaneous costs, and include your own pay in the budget."

Travel insiders also know when *not* to pay. "When I took a group to the San Juan Islands in Washington State, I had an arrangement with the guide that my cost would be free," says McMillan. "Be sure to arrange for group rates for all components of the trip. Then you can charge normal rates, and the markup can be your profit." (See the sidebar "Working With Travel Professionals" for more tips on getting complimentary perks.)

Your markup, and therefore your profit margin, will usually be larger on a longer, more exotic event. Yet even though the per-client profit is smaller for a short retreat, Pransky notes that there are trade-offs. "Since more people can afford to come on a shorter trip, you may have a bigger turnout and therefore a higher net profit," she says.

Bottom line: You can make more profit per client with longer events, but they are more work to plan, sell and conduct. Consider workload, and risk versus reward, accordingly.

Marketing and Promotions

You can most easily recruit retreat attendees from people who already know and love your training skills. Pransky observes that her getaways are usually filled by several key groups: people who read about the event in the monthly e-newsletter she sends to her database; clients returning for their second or third retreat; and friends of previous event attendees.

Once you get the word out to your current clientele, you can expand your marketing reach into other areas. "If you are trying to attract new people, use craigslist, your website, fliers and other advertising, but remember that this costs money that you'll need to factor into your budget," says Durkin, who also promotes his event at the retreat venue ahead of time.

The Fine Print and the Law

To avoid potential problems, create a written contract with clients that details what is—and isn't —included in the price; your refund and cancellation policies; the deadlines, rooming and eating arrangements; and when and how payments are due.

"Ensure your insurance company knows exactly what you are doing and will put in writing that you are covered," adds McMillan. Pransky has her clients sign an agreement that she has advised them to get travel insurance, and Durkin includes an exercise waiver for all attendees.

Certain U.S. states and some countries, such as the United Kingdom, also have specific laws governing anyone engaged in the sale of "package" vacations. These laws mean that if you organize a typical retreat without the help of an agent, you may be subject to minimum financial holding requirements by laws designed to protect consumers from tourism-related fraud. Check with a local tourism lawyer to see which regulations apply in your area.

Getting Paid to Travel the World

Despite the time and challenges involved in organizing a retreat, it can be profitable. Plus, it gives you the chance to create "trip-of-a-lifetime experiences" for loyal clientele, says McMillan.

In that vein, Durkin encourages fitness professionals to look at their first retreat as an opportunity to gain experience and generate business benefits beyond cash profit. "The first one you may break even," he says. "That's okay as long as you pay yourself—and create raving fans!"

SIDEBAR: Working With Travel Professionals

While you can organize a fitness retreat on your own, you might also choose to seek assistance from various travel pros:

A **travel agent** may have access to free perks for your clients, such as complimentary gifts and amenities. And the "travel coordinator," or "TC"—that's you!—is often entitled to a free hotel room or cruise cabin in exchange for guaranteeing a minimum number of bookings at a venue. Make sure you ask prospective agents about their experience with group bookings.

Retreat planning companies that specialize in fitness bookings usually take care of most of an event's logistics. Some may pay you back through profit-sharing or a flat-fee instructor payment, depending on who is responsible for recruiting clients and taking on financial risk. For more information on a profit-sharing model, check out Adventure Yoga Retreats (www.adventureyogaretreats.com). For a flat-fee payment model, see Via Yoga (www.viayoga.com). Both companies have experience working with personal trainers.

SIDEBAR: Sample Daily Schedule

When planning your day-to-day retreat schedule, don't forget to include nonexercise components! "You definitely want to allow for free time and plan at least one dinner together," Todd Durkin explains. "Provide a few hours of free time in the mid-to-late afternoon, and have some evening activities, such as social nights."

A typical schedule could look like this:

7:30 am: breakfast

8:30–10:00 am: fitness class or hike

10:00–11:30 pm: free time or lecture

11:30 am–12:30 pm: lunch

12:30–4:00 pm: free time:

rest or explore regional attractions

4:00–6:00 pm: workshop or fitness class

6:00 pm: dinner

7:30 pm: social activities on select nights



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