



SECRETS TO SERENITY
FROM THE CULTURES OF THE WORLD



calm



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the secrets

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introduction

Shhh.

Stop.

Listen.

Do you hear it over the ringing of your phone? Turn off the television or pull over the car and listen. Do you sense it? Keep your laptop powered down, or you might miss it.

Now, breathe... Do you feel it? It's right there, both obvious and hidden: calm. Even in our noisy, modern world – more cacophonous than our ancestors could have ever imagined – it's still there.

In Western-influenced societies we have mastered technology but created a virtual hamster wheel of stress in the process. Historians believe we work longer hours and take far fewer holidays than did medieval peasants – and they didn't have to endure hour-long, road-rage-filled commutes.

When exactly did it become a bragging right to not be calm? These days, it is considered a badge of honour in Western culture to be busy, stressed, unavailable. Downtime is so last century. And if you're ever feeling a little bored, don't worry. Just get thee to a smartphone, stat.

However, there's been a resurging call to step away from our whirlwinds of busy-ness. We've developed an almost zombie-like addiction to productivity, and researchers are starting to notice the toll on our health. As are we.

So, is attainment of clarity and peace only possible via a 32-hour flight and a four-day trek to a mountaintop sanctuary in a far-off land devoid of technologies and modern conveniences?

Nope.

At Lonely Planet we're travellers, yet even we are telling you that you don't need to travel to find calm. Of course, you could go to Japan to study the ancient art of bonsai (p15). Or you could buy a single bonsai tree, or even a cactus, at your local nursery. You could study the ancient sport of archery in Bhutan (p103), take an archery lesson back home, or just become one with a pub's dartboard for half an hour. While you might not be able to commune with the horses of nomadic Bedouin tribes any time soon (p13), you can certainly practise a little calming shiatsu on your cat.

If you promise to read the whole book, we'll let you in on the overarching secret right now: serenity is nowhere and everywhere. It's not in a location but, rather, in the search itself. Calm is in the state of awareness some researchers call mindfulness, and that others – athletes, dancers, artists and anyone who gets blissfully lost in an activity – know as flow.

We have begun to track the neuropsychological effect of contemplative states. In fact, several (extremely forgiving) meditating Buddhist monks and Carmelite nuns have consented to being studied inside an MRI machine where researchers watched their brains light up amid positive emotions. We now know that calmer brainwaves can elicit all sorts of desirable changes known as the relaxation response: lower blood pressure, less depression, reduced vigilance and fear, even a stronger brain. And you don't need to join a religious order to benefit.

The collection of traditions in this book is not definitive, but a sampling that showcases the diversity of the world's approaches to calm. It is also a practical ideas manual. We've avoided some obvious practices, such as yoga and t'ai chi, offering instead unexpected activities that you might not immediately associate with calm.

The lessons and secrets herein cater to our different needs as individuals. While one person might find calm in raw nature, gliding through water in an Inuit kayak (p11); another might crave the orderliness of feng shui (p105). Or perhaps relinquishing control in a safe environment speaks to you, such as when dancing backwards during an Argentine tango (p99) or transcending individual consciousness in West African *djembe* drumming (p47)? For some, calm is achieved through repetition and ritual, exemplified in two traditions as different as the Sufi whirling dervish (p59) and British high tea (p107). And yet others find calm in simply writing down their thoughts in a journal (p111).

Just like exercise for its own sake wasn't invented until it needed to be, neither was this concerted search for calm. Before we had electric lights, downtime was ingrained in the laws of nature. While post-sundown rest is a necessity in parts of the Gambia (p65), most of us can stay plugged in 24/7.

But what our modern society has taken away, it can give back. We can read about and incorporate into our lives lessons in calm from around the world. And maybe, one day, we can travel to experience a few. There's nothing like a journey to put your own problems into perspective. And when you're in the airport security line? Just remember to take a moment, and breathe.

