

TAKING WELLNESS TO A NEW DIMENSION

A journey outside the comfort zone at a psychedelic-assisted therapy retreat

BY CHRIS RYALL

nervously bring the vape, filled with a dry herb mixture, to my mouth. Cannabis is making an authorized entry into my body in a very surreal and emotionally charged cannabis ceremony.

My mind is about to enter a new dimension. Luckily for me, the clinical and hospitality team at Dimensions Retreats, a new psychedelic-assisted healing program in the Algonquin Highlands three hours north of Toronto, has provided extensive preparation and answered my endless questions about this new journey. I was there during a soft opening in late March before it officially opened in May 2023.

What's the big deal?

My drug use can be summed up as one toke on a joint of marijuana when I was 16 and nothing since other than taking a Tylenol or similar for a headache or body ache. This was a *big* deal for me, as I abhor smoking anything and detest the skunky smell of cannabis.

The lakeside setting and abundant forest trails, and staying in one of the 17 comfortable and luxuriously appointed cabins aid in reconnecting with nature and digging into more meaningful parts of your mind and life and yes, past traumas as well.

The cozy cabins include a plush bed, your choice of pillow, soaker tub with Epsom salts, controlled bathroom floor and

cabin temperature settings, choice of roasted coffee and teas, large selection of healthy and non-alcoholic drinks, and an outdoor seating area with views of Maple Lake or the forest.

Science-based research

Andrew Galloway, Dimensions Retreats co-founder and chief operating officer, says, "Our psychedelic-assisted therapy programs are supported by neuroscientific research, evidence-based practices, and the extensive experience of our respected therapeutic team."

Dimensions Algonquin Highlands clinic director and registered psychotherapist Donald Currie leads the team with fellow psychotherapist Gina Miranda, plant elder Don Khalsa, and other clinical staff. Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and Health Canada also collaborate with Dimensions on psychedelic-assisted therapy program research and studies. Dimensions is also developing programs for military personnel dealing with PTSD and other mental health issues.

Dimensions' intention for each participant (currently they limit it to 12) for their five-day/four-night Ascend program is Retreat, Reset and Transform. Confidentiality and physical and mental safety are a priority. Clinical staff guide you on your journey before, during, and integration after the retreat.

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Prior to transcending

Prior to visiting, there is an assessment and intake process to make sure you are a suitable candidate for the program. Detailed medical history and previous drug use questions are asked (everything is kept in the strictest confidence and adheres to all privacy laws) in a one-hour virtual session with an intake professional. They ask what your intentions are for your visit. Dimensions is not an addiction clinic and is not suitable for those currently dealing with drug or alcohol issues.

If approved by the clinic director then guests receive a variety of forms, including waivers for the cannabis ceremony, confidentiality agreements, as well as any required spa and related industry forms for massages and wellness activities.

Range of services

Guests have a full range of daily wellness services to choose from, including Thai, Swedish, hot stone, and cranial sacral massages; Reiki; float tank sessions; bio sound therapy; breathwork; sound baths; yoga; qigong; and meditations. In the winter, cold plunges in the lake are available.

All meals are at a communal long table and even the clinical team joins in. Dimensions hired executive chef Miriam Echeverria, who has worked in Mexico and in top Toronto

restaurants. Echeverria creates a healthy and tasty menu to maximize the benefits of the Ceremonial Day with immune-boosting and anti-inflammatory berries, which cleanse the body, and mushrooms, which protect and support brain health.

The Ceremony

The highlight, of course, is the Ceremonial Day. On the third day—after individual and group therapy sessions, breathwork, healthy food, and an assortment of other services—our group goes into the Ceremonial Dome. It's a safe and tranquil setting. I am here with four female participants and three Dimensions staff—Donald and Gina the psychotherapists and Don the plant elder. We lie down on a mat accompanied with a heavy blanket, beanbag eye pillow, vape, and our unique cannabis blends that Don mixed the day before. Dimensions does not sell or provide any cannabis. Participants must bring their own but are given guidance on what type to buy and amount.

Throughout the three-hour ceremony, we are told how many puffs to take and how to inhale while the team checks in on us at various intervals. Breathing, chanting, and singing by the clinical team goes on as well during the ceremony.

One woman breaks out laughing, others follow. Not me. I think I was like President Clinton—I never inhaled (or not properly)!

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After three rounds my body finally felt a change—like a weight was lifted and blood flowing more effortlessly. The first time in years. Some participants were laughing uncontrollably, some quiet, and others sobbing. After a fourth round of inhaling a mental switch went off.

My mind travelled to a place nowhere I expected—to my mom’s passing 13 years ago while I was on a business trip in Germany. Her death was unexpected and I never had a chance to tell her before passing that she was a good mother and other cherished thoughts. Through this psychedelic experience, I was able to go to a point in my mind that had previously been blocked. I started choking up and began sobbing. Gina came over and simply sat next to me and comforted me, letting me say what I needed to say. Exposing my emotions and sobbing like that in front of mainly strangers I had just met two days earlier was transforming. It was both an emotional and uplifting experience.

Currie says, “Most clients reported deep transformations and a changed relationship with their physical bodies and mental state.”

Differentiated approach to healing

Psychedelic retreats have been popping up since cannabis became legal in Canada and other countries around the world. But what makes Dimensions different?

“Our retreats are built with a clinical psychotherapeutic lens,” explains Currie. “What sets us apart is that we braid psychotherapies with other mind and body practices [the various wellness services Dimensions Retreats offers]. Our approach combines the insights of western science with the ancient traditions of plant medicine to create a new paradigm of mental health treatment to improve well-being.”

Transformative experience

Dimensions is expanding. After opening the Algonquin Highlands retreat, Dimensions plans to add healing programs in Costa Rica and Jamaica, and will be opening in Amsterdam in late fall.

Many have asked me if I’d try cannabis again. Maybe. This program is not about getting high. It’s a transformative and healing experience incorporating many elements. Without the science and clinical team behind it, the trust and caring of the staff and fellow participants, and the tranquil nature setting, I would never have gone through with it. My anti-drug feelings run deep. But in the right setting, with the right people, and a safe clinical approach, perhaps there will be another time.

For now, the team at Dimensions provided the gateway for me to reach a different plateau, and the opportunity to finally say, “Thanks, Mom.” **S**