

ETC



Gonna miss you lots!

SO HARD TO SAY GOODBYE

What happens at a tech-free retreat for Internet addicts
By Claire Suddath

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Julia Test, a 28-year-old freelance photographer, can't stop checking Facebook. Her last relationship failed partly because she and her ex kept fighting over texts instead of talking things out in person. "It wasn't a long-distance relationship or anything," she says. "It's just easier to say something mean in a text than watching someone's face when you say it." Jen McDowell, a director of entertainment at the travel company Olivia, says her bosses have told her she's too tethered to her job. "I never took vacation," she says. "Finally, they came to me and said, 'We'll have legal problems if you don't take at least three days off. Please leave.'" A woman named Monika, who says only that she works for "a very large company in Redmond, Wash.," also never takes vacation. Unfortunately for her, her bosses are fine with that.

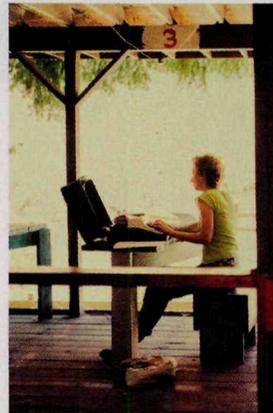
This isn't a group therapy session. It's Digital Detox, a three-day retreat at Shambhalah Ranch in Northern California for people who feel addicted to their gadgets. For 72 hours, the 11 participants, who've paid from \$595 for a twin bed to \$1,400 for a suite, eat vegan food, practice yoga, swim in a nearby creek, take long walks in the woods, and keep a journal about being offline. (Typewriters are available for anyone not used to longhand.) The ranch is two-and-a-half hours north of San Francisco, so most guests come from the Bay Area, although a few have flown in from Seattle and New York. They're here for a variety of reasons—bad breakups, career troubles—but there's one thing everyone has in common: They're driven to distraction by the Internet.

Isn't everyone? Checking e-mail in the bathroom and sleeping with your cell phone by your bed are now considered normal. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2007 only 58 percent of people used their phones to text; last year it was 80 percent. More than half of all cell phone users have smartphones, giving them Internet access all the time. As a result, the number of hours Americans spend collectively online has almost doubled since

2010, according to ComScore, a digital analytics company. Teens and twentysomethings are the most wired. In 2011, Diana Rehling and Wendy Bjorklund, communications professors at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, surveyed their undergraduates and found that the average college student checks Facebook 20 times an hour.

Some are starting to rebel against this constant compulsion to connect. Webby Awards founder Tiffany Shlain, an advocate of unplugging, self-corrects by instituting one technology-free day each week. "It's the slowest day in the world," she says. Shlain lectures frequently about the benefits of her "technology shabbats." Sherry Turkle, director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self and the author of *Alone Together*, which explores the way the Internet constrains offline relationships, has also observed this shift. "I don't want to say it's a movement just yet, but it does seem like a lot of people have gotten to the point with technology where common sense is starting to kick in," she says. "We've finally realized that we have to start making healthier choices."

That's what happened to Digital Detox's co-founder, Levi Felix. In 2009, Felix, now 29, was a vice president at a Los Angeles Internet startup, Causecast, working 80 hours a week and sleeping with his cell phone under his pillow. He was diagnosed with an esophageal tear that doctors told him was "related to too much stress, too much coffee, too much work, and too much Thai takeout." So he and his girlfriend, Brooke Dean, quit their jobs and traveled the world for nine months, eventually landing at a communal farm in Cambodia. When they returned, they noticed their friends had grown even more attached to



WE'RE ALL ADDICTED

Step away from your computers, America



95%

People who admit to watching TV, playing video games, or using a computer within an hour of going to sleep

63%
Smartphone users who say their constant availability increases employers' expectations that they work longer hours

29%
Cell phone owners who said they couldn't "live without" a phone



41
Hours the average American spends watching some form of video (TV, tablet, computer, or smartphone) per week—that works out to 5.5 hours a day

7

Minutes the average teenager spends reading something offline per weekend day

267,000,000

Estimated number of Americans who regularly use the Internet

50%
Households with income greater than \$75,000 that have a tablet

37
Number of times people switch tasks every hour if they have e-mail open constantly at work

72%
Adult Internet users who join social media, up from 67 percent in 2012

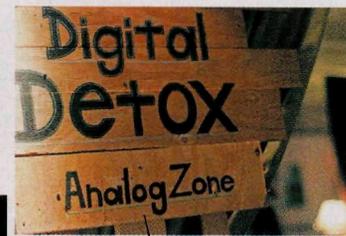


44%
Cell phone users who sleep with their phone next to their bed

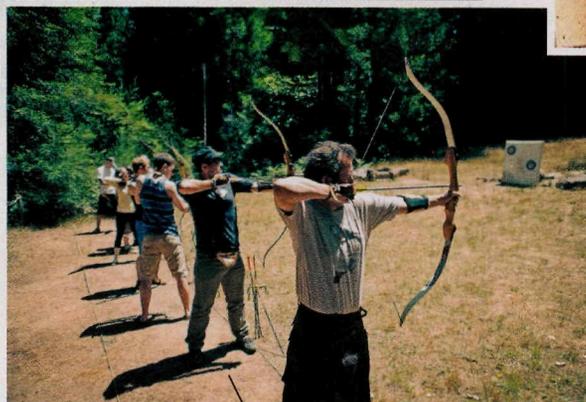
\$231 BILLION

Amount Americans spent shopping online in 2012

The picturesque Shambhalah Ranch



You are officially warned



Getting aggression out in an archery class

Old-fashioned typewriters are allowed



social media. “I couldn’t figure out why people were staring down at their phones all the time,” Felix says. He read *Turtle’s Alone Together* and came up with the idea of Digital Detox.

Felix and Dean hosted the first retreat in June 2012. Since then their venture has grown to a series of vacation-esque unplugging seminars in places such as Costa Rica and Cambodia. Earlier this year they hosted an adult summer camp where 300 professionals made lanyards and performed talent show routines. The program’s core remains small, 10- to 15-person retreats in the redwoods. Digital Detox feels kind of like a camping trip with some particularly touchy-feely California friends.

Minus the pot. There’s not even alcohol or coffee, just some weak black tea to stave off caffeine headaches. When guests arrive, Felix takes their digital devices and stores them in paper bags, along with any watches and clocks. Shambhalah Ranch is surrounded by redwoods—at one point, participants actually hug a tree—but since cameras are gadgets, detoxers aren’t allowed to take pictures. When they want to remember an experience, they make a square with their thumbs and index fingers, bring it up to their eyes, and say, “Click!” They’re ordinarily forbidden from discussing ages or jobs (exceptions are made for nosy reporters). That way everyone from the recent college grad to the company executive will feel as if he’s among peers.

On the second day of Digital Detox, Anna Trautman, a quality-control lab assistant at Gordon Biersch Brewing, spends several hours sitting quietly by a lake contemplating whether she has the guts to quit her job and travel alone. “I’d never make the time to sit and think about this if I had my phone,” she says later that night. “I would’ve just spent hours looking

IT’S LIKE A CAMPING TRIP WITH TOUCHY-FEELY FRIENDS

at strangers’ photos on Instagram instead.” “It feels like the 1990s again!” says Laura Monfredini, 39, an in-house lawyer for the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco.

“Things were so much slower back then. I used to be able to read a whole book at a time. Now I can only do one or two chapters before I think, Oh, what’s on Facebook?” While Monfredini appreciates getting her attention span back, she’s not sure that reverting to a pre-Web lifestyle is better. The Internet makes our lives more convenient, she argues.

She’s not the only one struggling to live without technology, even for just a few days. One attendee keeps feeling phantom cell phone vibrations. Another misses texting her best friend. Monika from Washington has the hardest time: She spends the weekend making a mental list of things she wants to Google when she gets back online. Still, she and everyone else say they end the weekend refreshed. “You know when a computer is on too long, and it starts overheating and making those whirring noises?” says Evan Kleiman, who works in business development and lives in Los Angeles. “I feel like my brain had been doing that. This weekend I finally managed to turn it off.”

On the last morning everyone discusses how long they think they’ll last before turning their phones back on. They wonder if being bombarded with three days of e-mail is really the best way to reenter the world. Kleiman says he feels as if he doesn’t even need his phone anymore, though he admits he won’t get rid of it. McDowell says she still won’t take any of her vacation days, but from now on she vows to go device-free every morning before work. (A month later, she confesses she hasn’t kept this promise.) “I know it’s not PC to say this here, but I miss my phone,” Monfredini says. When she leaves the ranch, the first thing she does is turn it back on. **B**

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