

Where Silicon Valley Is Going to Get in Touch With Its Soul

The Esalen Institute, a storied hippie hotel in Big Sur, Calif., has reopened with a mission to help technologists who discover that “inside they’re hurting.”

By NELLIE BOWLES

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BIG SUR, Calif. — Silicon Valley, facing a crisis of the soul, has found a retreat center.

It has been a hard year for the tech industry. Prominent figures like Sean Parker and Justin Rosenstein, horrified by what technology has become, have begun to publicly denounce companies like Facebook that made them rich.

And so Silicon Valley has come to the Esalen Institute, a storied hippie hotel here on the Pacific coast south of Carmel, Calif. After storm damage in the spring and a skeleton crew in the summer, the institute was fully reopened in October with a new director and a new mission: It will be a home for technologists to reckon with what they have built.

This is a radical change for the rambling old center. Founded in 1962, the nonprofit helped bring yoga, organic food and meditation into the American mainstream.

The leaders behind humanist psychology worked from the lodge, and legend has it that Hunter S. Thompson wandered the place with a shotgun. Nudity was the norm.

took out the roads on all sides, and participants in a massage workshop had to be evacuated from a hilltop by helicopter. While the institute was closed, flooded and losing \$1 million a month, its board made big changes. When the road reopened in October, the place had a new executive director, Ben Tauber, and its new mission.

“There’s a dawning consciousness emerging in Silicon Valley as people recognize that their conventional success isn’t necessarily making the world a better place,” said Mr. Tauber, 34, a former Google product manager and start-up executive coach. “The C.E.O.s, inside they’re hurting. They can’t sleep at night.”

Mr. Tauber has some competition. A former chief executive of Juniper Networks, Scott Kriens, opened his own tech and soul center nearby in May, with construction finishing in February. The goal of the center, called 1440 Multiversity, is to “recognize that the blazing success of the internet catalyzed powerful connections, yet did not help people connect to themselves.”

Still, there is most likely enough crisis to go around. Mr. Tauber has stacked Esalen’s calendar with sessions by Silicon Valley leaders, which are selling out.

Dave Morin, a venture capitalist and early Facebook employee, will lead a program on depression and tech; a former Google ethicist, Tristan Harris, led a weekend on internet addiction; and tech futurists will host a conference on virtual reality and spirituality. Chargers have been installed for Tesla electric cars, and there is usually a line to use them. The new sessions in 2018 are aimed at the workers building virtual reality, artificial intelligence and social networks.

“They wonder if they’re doing the right thing for humanity,” Mr. Tauber said. “These are questions we can only answer behind closed doors.”

About a three-hour drive south from San Francisco along Highway 1, past hundreds of tourists pulled off on the side of the road, Esalen comes in around a turn.

It holds 120 guests, who stay in little cottages along the rugged coast and wander between classes, the hot springs and the dining hall. The kitchen is famous for its bread, especially the sourdough rye, which sits out all day and night along with apricot spread and peanut butter for snacking. This is not a health retreat.

The bar serves kombucha, coconut water, wine and beer. Sitting and having a cold kombucha one recent evening was Bodhi Kalayjian, 47, who lives in Big Sur, wears flip flops and has shaggy gray-blond hair.

“It’s about putting Silicon Valley back in their bodies,” he said. “Everybody’s got a soul. It’s about finding it.”

Mr. Kalayjian was an early Google employee and Google chef, but “once the I.P.O. happened it was less fun,” he said. Now he’s an Esalen baker and masseur.

“The old-timey hippies are moving into the history books, but why would you ever want to keep things static?” he said. “If you do your work, things are always in a state of change.”

Gopi Kallayil, the chief evangelist of brand marketing at Google, was running late from work to the class he would host at Esalen called “Connect to Your Inner-Net.”

His assistants were scrambling to set up. “It has to be so if two engineers are sitting on opposite sides they wouldn’t feel there is too much space between them,” said Jnanada Schalk, who was formerly named Jennie and is assisting Mr. Kallayil as a volunteer.

Mr. Kallayil arrived wearing a pink button-down and a large Android smartwatch. He had met Mr. Tauber when they worked for Google Plus, the search engine’s social networking feature.

Mr. Kallayil had the participants go in a circle and introduce themselves. There was a health tech investor, a product manager, several software engineers and developers, an entrepreneur who had just sold his food start-up, a nurse, an affordable-housing advocate and two lawyers. Mr. Kallayil spoke in the language of Silicon Valley.

“What is it that moves the technology to where your inner net moves forward?” he asked. “Thankfully, other people have developed the operating manual.”

He said that many of the people who came to him had floundered this year, and that he, too, found himself wondering about the impact of his work.

“What are these technologies doing?” said Mr. Kallayil, who also teaches at 1440. “Decisions we make affect more than one billion people. Here, you shed your clothes and your inhibition, and there’s a rawness.”

The Inner-Net schedule is loosely packed. The next morning, there would be mindful walking, mindful eating, reimagining work and life integration, then compassion practice, self-compassion and, finally, yoga. After dinner, there would be work on envisioning lives as they are and as we want them to be. Then Mr. Kallayil would lead some chanting.

“One of the portals we use to put the technology for the body at peak performance is music,” he said. “Sierra will play the flute, Jennie the violin.”

Every morning is dance awake, a chakra meditation and guitar class where Esalen guests dance across the large hardwood floor.

Down in the kitchen, Mr. Kallayil’s assistant collected a large bag of raisins for eating during meditation.

“I just sold my start-up and needed a place to reflect,” said Sam McBride, 31, from Chicago. “To give me some perspective.”

Esalen's hot springs are good all day but are famous for the night scene, when they open to the public between 1 and 3 a.m. A weekend stay for a couple at Esalen can cost \$2,890, so budget travelers stay nearby and come wandering in with towels a little after midnight.

The dirt path to the baths leads to a concrete corridor and a changing room. Around a corner, it was pitch black with an overpowering smell of sulfur. As the eyes adjusted to starlight, big steaming concrete hot tubs, claw-foot personal tubs and a couple of dozen quiet naked bodies could be seen. The space cannot be photographed.

"I was tired of my life," said Marina Kurikhina, 32, who lives on a ranch nearby. "I represented Latin American art at a gallery in London. Now I teach creative subconscious painting."

She said people visited Esalen "for transformation." Soon, she plans to open a health bar on site serving raw desserts, cold-pressed juices and high-end coffee.

With the focus on the emotional life of executives, Esalen plans to close Gazebo, its preschool of 40 years.

"It was the soul of the institution of Esalen — all those little babies and what they're going to be," said Zoe Garcia, a guest and nearby resident, who has been going to Esalen for 30 years.

The closing is partly a sign of the region's changing demographics. As more of Big Sur's homes are bought by tech executives as second homes, there are not as many young children, so the class of 30 had dwindled to 15 before the floods shut it down.

"It's incredibly sad," said Cortlan Robertson, whose daughter attended Gazebo and who said the Big Sur community had offered to pay for the preschool to continue. "Ben is always saying it's just child care. But it was so much more."

Closing Gazebo was also a sign of a shifting culture and new rules.

“Back then, we could go topless in the lodge,” Ms. Garcia said. “More conservative people started to come, so they started to make rules. Now next is mindfulness and technology. Who knows?”

Mr. Tauber was a surprising pick to head a retreat center. He had previously founded a real-time celebrity geo-stalking service called JustSpotted when Google hired him and his team in 2011. Soon after, he vacationed in Big Sur and decided his work was causing harm, he said.

“I realized I was addicting people to their phones,” Mr. Tauber said. “It’s a crisis that everyone’s in the culture of killing it, and inside they’re dying.”

In the hot spring one night, he ran into an Esalen leader who invited him to a conscious business event. Mr. Tauber quit Google to open a business coaching start-up for founders and developed Esalen’s technology strategy, joining the board in 2015. During the springtime flooding, as Esalen cut its staff to 50 from 330, Mr. Tauber took over.

His plan is to aim programming at top executives. “How do we scale our impact as an organization?” he asked. “We do it through impacting the influencers.”

His house is a wood-and-stone half circle built into the hillside, looking out through the cypress onto the water. He wanted a better view so had the cypress pruned. He has a ukulele, a prayer bowl and various massage tools by the sofa. By the dying embers of a fire that he makes every morning, he was reading a history of Esalen and a Summer of Love coffee table book.

Upstairs, the Inner-Net class was doing a compassion exercise. Everyone spent 10 minutes looking into a stranger’s eyes and silently repeating phrases like “this person has emotions just like me,” “this person has experienced pain and suffering just like me,” “this person will die just like me.” They were barefoot. Some were wrapped in coarse blankets.

The art teacher downstairs had made a trough of warm, foaming mushroom drink.

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