

TRIPS Study

FAQs about Psychedelic Retreats



The following information is based on review of available evidence and research conducted as part of a project seeking to understand the landscape of psychedelic retreats and the experiences of retreat participants. We do not endorse illegal psychedelic use, and the information provided should not be taken as medical or legal advice.

What should I know before going on a psychedelic retreat?

FAQs:

1

What is a psychedelic retreat?

- A psychedelic retreat is an organized gathering for use of psychoactive substances.
- Psychedelic retreats range in duration from a single ceremony to multi-week programs with multiple psychedelic ceremonies.
- Some psychedelic retreats are held in the United States; others are located in countries with more lenient drug policies and/or where there is a history of indigenous traditional or ceremonial use of psychedelics.
- While some retreats intend to provide psychedelics in ways that are authentic to indigenous traditions, others are more geared towards specific religious traditions, wellness, or medical/mental health aims.¹
- A variety of substances may be used as part of psychedelic retreats including (but not limited to): psilocybin mushrooms, ayahuasca, San Pedro (Huachuma), peyote, ibogaine, or 5-MEO-DMT.

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What is usually involved in a psychedelic retreat?

- Each psychedelic retreat is different; it is important to talk to retreat organizers to understand exactly what is involved.¹
- Most retreats involve some form of preparation, such as a special diet, suggested readings, or opportunities for self-reflection prior to participating in a psychedelic ceremony.
- Psychedelics are often consumed during a drug session or ceremony in the retreat setting. Depending on the drug, this session/ceremony can last anywhere from a few minutes to several hours or even days. It is important to know what drugs are offered on retreat and to ask what type of facilitation and supervision is available during these sessions.
- Some retreats offer structured activities to help participants integrate their experience. Whether this is offered or not, it is recommended that participants carve out time after the retreat to process the experience. Returning to daily life responsibilities and work too quickly can be jarring.

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Are psychedelic retreats legal?

- In the United States, psychedelics are federally classified as Schedule I substances and in most cases are illegal.
- Few organizations have a religious-use exemption enabling them to use psychedelics legally in the United States. These organizations usually require membership to participate.
- A few states and local jurisdictions have passed legislation to decriminalize the use of certain psychedelics, but these substances remain federally illegal in the United States.
- Internationally, retreats operate in places with fewer restrictions or prohibitions on psychedelic use, although local regulations vary.

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What are the potential benefits of psychedelic retreats?

- Participating in a psychedelic retreat can yield various personal and social benefits.
- Research suggests that participation in psychedelic retreats can lead to improvements in depression, anxiety, substance use, or general wellbeing.²⁻⁵
- Participating in psychedelic retreats can also be spiritually enriching, as psychedelic experiences are often interpreted as having spiritual significance.
- While there is some evidence suggesting benefits, it is important to remember that psychedelics are not a “magic bullet” and may not resolve symptoms or improve well-being.

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How safe are psychedelic retreats?

- Psychedelic retreats can be safe for healthy adults, but the level of safety can vary depending on substances being offered and practices of organizations hosting retreats.
- Individuals with a pre-existing medical condition, such as heart disease⁶ or a history (or family history) of serious mental illness,⁷ should talk to their doctor before attending a psychedelic retreat.
- Retreats that have harm reduction measures in place like screening, trained facilitators, and access to emergency services may be safer.
- Shorter retreats that include multiple drug sessions or ceremonies or that encourage consumption of different drugs simultaneously may be riskier.
- Some individuals experience adverse effects from taking psychedelics, which can last several hours, or in rare cases, may persist long-term.
- Aside from risks associated with psychedelic use, attending retreats carries the same risk as regional or international travel.

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What should I know about retreat facilitators?

- Retreat facilitators may hold a variety of credentials or may have been trained in shamanic traditions.
- There are no universally recognized credentials or standards for retreat facilitators.
- If you are concerned about or want to attend a retreat where facilitators have specific credentials, ask about facilitator training and research the credentialing body or training program.
- If you have a pre-existing mental health condition or are at risk, it may be important to select a retreat where facilitators have formal training in mental healthcare.
- Pay attention to and ask about facilitator-to-participant ratio. A lower ratio may be cause for concern, as facilitators may not be prepared to meet all individuals' needs during a ceremony.
- Sometimes retreat facilitators consume the psychedelic substance along with participants. It may be important to know if there will be someone present during the ceremony who is sober and able to help in case of an emergency.

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What do I need to know or ask if I take medications or have a medical or psychiatric condition?

- Consuming certain psychedelics while on antidepressants may lead to serotonin toxicity,⁸ which is a serious condition caused by having too much serotonin in the body.
- Many retreats require or recommend tapering off psychiatric medications prior to participating in a psychedelic ceremony (referred to as medication washout). Retreats vary in the length of time they require or recommend participants be off psychiatric medications. Medication washout can range from 1 day to more than 6 weeks.
- Abruptly discontinuing medications such as antidepressants can be risky. You should consult your prescribing physician or a medical professional with relevant expertise to discuss risks and the possibility of tapering off your prescribed medications if necessary.
- Work with your medical provider to establish a plan for if and how you will resume taking prescribed medications after the retreat.
- If you are using medications for or have an untreated heart condition, psychedelic retreats may not be safe for you due to psychedelics' effects on the cardiovascular system.⁶

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What should I know about the substances that might be offered at a retreat and how they might be administered?

- It is common for retreats to offer psychedelics, as well as additional non-psychedelic substances, such as tobacco during a ceremony or drug session.¹
- Some retreats offer multiple psychedelics throughout the duration of the retreat. Each psychedelic drug has a distinct psychoactive effect and risk profile. More research is needed to better understand the risks and benefits of taking multiple psychedelics simultaneously and/or concurrently.
- Different psychedelics are administered differently. Some are brewed into a tea that you drink, while others are smoked or consumed in a capsule or powder.
- Remember that you always have the right to refuse any substance that you do not want to consume.

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What are retreat practices that can help ensure participant safety that I should consider before selecting a retreat?

- Medical screening procedures, not just for verifying that it's safe for you to participate, but also to ensure that other participants are vetted.
- Emergency procedures and access to emergency equipment.
- Proximity to hospitals or higher level medical care in case of emergency.
- Preparation activities to help you establish expectations and a good mindset prior to your experience.
- Integration services to help you make sense of your experience and identify insights you can apply in your everyday life.
- Ethics statements or informed consent procedures to make sure you feel comfortable with what you are signing up for.

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I decided I want to go on a retreat. How should I prepare?

- Reflect on why you are seeking out a psychedelic experience and whether a retreat is the best setting for you.
- Do your research. Read reviews of specific retreat centers and talk to retreat organizations to identify which program might be right for you. Ask to speak to previous participants or read testimonials to gain a better understanding of the experience.
- Consider travelling with a trusted friend or family member for added security and a sense of comfort during your retreat.
- If you have a medical or mental health condition, speak to a healthcare provider with relevant expertise to appropriately prepare.
- Once you have signed up for a retreat, begin the work of preparing—mentally, emotionally, and physically. This may include adopting a healthier lifestyle, avoiding drugs and alcohol, journaling, or talking to a trained therapist or trusted friend about your intentions and expectations. You may also want to talk to someone you trust about the changes you're considering before making any.

I attended a retreat and feel restless, unsettled, or like my mental health symptoms have gotten worse. Who should I talk to?

- If your experience has left you feeling confused, unsettled, or like your symptoms have worsened, you should consult with a mental health provider, preferably one who has experience with psychedelic integration.
- Identifying a provider who has expertise in psychedelics prior to attending a retreat can help in case you experience issues after your retreat.
- Your experiences may lead you to evaluate your life, identity, and relationships in a new light. This may be empowering or uncomfortable for you and your significant others. Consider not making significant life changes immediately after participating in a psychedelic retreat.

Below is a list of resources relevant to psychedelic retreats and mental health. These are for informational purposes only. We do not condone illegal use of psychedelic substances. Nor do we endorse the practices of specific retreat organizations or mental health practitioners.

Psychedelic harm reduction resources:

Before you trip



Directories of psychedelic practitioners and integration specialists:



Psychedelic retreat review platforms:



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