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Alvaro and Lisa's Brain Vacation

Alvaro Fernandez sometimes reads books in one hour. By concentrating as hard as he can, skimming through paragraphs looking for the most salient points, and constantly being aware of the time constraints, he says he "remembers more things" than he would if he were to read every word.

Shortly after I met him at a "brain fitness" conference sponsored by the San Francisco company he co-founded, SharpBrains, he mentioned to me that he would be leaving for France, Norway, and Spain with his wife, Lisa Neuberger-Fernandez, on a "brain fitness vacation."

"What the hell is that?" I blurted out.

"I'm very serious," he replied. "A brain fitness vacation is like a regular vacation, only you attend events, do exercises, and arrange for experiences that address the aspects of good brain health: physical exercise, mental exercise, good nutrition, and stress management."

I asked Alvaro to keep notes and arranged to meet him when he got back. Three weeks later we met in the lobby of San Francisco's Four Seasons Hotel for tea and conversation.

Book Party for Brains

The first leg of Alvaro's trip was four days in the beautiful French Riviera city of Nice, where he and Lisa met with 16 of their best friends from the U.S., Spain, Korea, the U.K., and France. Prior to their rendezvous, each person agreed to read an important, compelling book that they could then discuss and share with others.

By a funny coincidence, four of the people actually read the same book: *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* by Elizabeth Gilbert. Other books, which they introduced to each other at a lavish dinner party, included *The Natural History of the Senses* by Diane Ackerman, and *Earth in Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* by Al Gore. (Alvaro, of course, read his book, *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins, in an hour.)

"We had some great conversations about science, spirituality and Buddhism," Alvaro reports, "and were able to connect many more dots than usual thanks to the combination of stimulating friends and diverse books and themes."

Following Nice, Alvaro and Lisa spent four days in Oslo, Norway, attending the UN World Environment Day and the opening of a spectacular art exhibit designed to confront the global warming changes of melting of ice, snow, and permafrost in the Himalayas, Kilimanjaro, the Andes and other places.

Let's Play My Brain vs. Your Brain



Peter H. Chang

San Pedro, in southern Spain, was the last leg, where Alvaro and Lisa spent a lot of time playing the "mentally stimulating" game of paddle tennis. All of this, however, represents just some highlights of their brain fitness vacation. While traveling on the plane or in a taxi, or just relaxing at their hotel, Lisa and Alvaro engaged in many mental exercise games, including:

- **Guesstimation.** Lisa asks Alvaro a question, "How many trees are there in San Francisco?" To come up with an answer, Alvaro first tries to guess how many trees, on average, there are in a city block. He then calculates approximately how many blocks there are in a square mile, followed by how many square miles there are in San Francisco, and so on.
- **Number Series.** Alvaro says, "Two, three," and Lisa replies, "four, six." Alvaro then says, "Six, nine," and Lisa replies, "Eight, twelve." He says, "Ten, fifteen," and the sequence goes on as long and as fast as you can keep doing it.
- **Haiku.** During the entire vacation, Alvaro and Lisa composed haiku for each other every morning. The rule was they couldn't write them down. They had to create them in their heads and remember them.
- **Sensory training.** Lisa puts a piece of chocolate into Alvaro's mouth while his eyes are closed. He lets it melt completely without chewing and without opening his eyes. Next, he puts a grape in Lisa's mouth.
- **Visualizations.** Alvaro and Lisa sit quietly for about 15 minutes, breathe deeply using their diaphragms, and visualize special moments from their past, such as the most beautiful view they've ever seen, or a loving personal moment.
- **Physical exercise.** Besides paddle ball, the couple plays tennis, gets in plenty of walking and hikes up mountain passes.

Is there a brain-fitness vacation in your future? For most people, this might seem a bit obsessive. However, certain aspects of Lisa and Alvaro's trip really should be part of everyone's vacation and, indeed, everybody's daily life. To learn more about Alvaro Fernandez and his company SharpBrains, and to read all the great information he's written and published about brain fitness, go to sharpbrains.com [1].

FOR ELDR READERS ONLY!

Sharpbrains will give you a free, downloadable copy of their eGuide, "Brain Fitness 101: 9 Answers to Your Top 25 Questions," by Elkhonon Goldberg, Ph.D. and Alvaro Fernandez (\$11.95 value). Simply go to sharpbrains.com/eldr [2].

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