

The Offsite Playbook

*Everything your leadership team needs to know
about planning a retreat that actually changes things.*

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A NOTE FROM LINDSAY

I built this because I lived it.

I was a high-performing executive at a tech startup. I loved the company and the clients.

But I was exhausted. Not the ordinary kind. The kind where someone asks you a question in a meeting and you genuinely cannot form a sentence.

I booked a one-way from LA to Hawaii. I spent six months working remotely from a retreat centre, slowing everything down and stepping away from the noise.

Those six months? I increased my sales by over 30% ARR. Turns out the best thing I could do for my performance was stop performing and start thinking.

A friend and I built our first retreat together. Afterwards, one of the guests asked: 'When's the next one? Can I come to every single one?'

That question became Sūtra Retreats.

I now design luxury corporate retreats across Europe and the UK, with the operational rigour to execute without a dropped detail and the experience design to make those days genuinely memorable.

Lindsay Vogel

Founder, Sūtra Retreats

The Science and The Case

*"Getting your team out of the building is not a perk.
It is a performance strategy. The research proves it."*

What the science actually shows

about teams, environment, and decision-making.

85%

of executives say their best business decisions were made outside the office, in calmer, less pressured environments

Source: Harvard Business Review

34x

more effective. Face-to-face contact builds trust and psychological safety faster than any digital interaction

Source: MIT Human Dynamics Lab

21%

higher profitability in teams with strong cohesion, belonging, and psychological safety

Source: Gallup State of the Workplace

30%

more likely to report strong strategic alignment. Teams that hold structured annual offsites vs those that do not

Source: Deloitte Human Capital

2.4x

more likely to hit performance targets. Organisations investing in structured leadership development

Source: McKinsey and Company

23%

faster and better decisions. Leaders who build deliberate reflection time into their rhythm outside daily operations

Source: Harvard Business School

Why the brain performs better *when you change the environment.*

The Default Mode Network fires when you stop.

The brain's Default Mode Network (DMN) is the seat of creative thinking, strategic insight, and self-reflection. The problem: it only activates during genuine cognitive rest and environmental novelty. In a busy office, it rarely gets the chance. Research from UC Santa Barbara found that stepping away from high-demand tasks, particularly into natural settings, significantly boosted creative problem-solving and strategic insight generation.

Chronic stress narrows the thinking that leadership requires.

Sustained workplace pressure keeps the brain in reactive mode. This narrows cognitive focus, reduces the capacity for abstract thinking, and makes long-range planning harder, precisely the thinking leadership demands most. A 2019 Stanford study found that removal from high-stress environments, particularly to natural settings, reduced these effects measurably within 90 minutes. Over three days, the restoration is significant.

Shared experience changes how teams trust each other.

Shared physical experiences, including meals, walks, and unfamiliar environments, trigger the neurochemical responses linked to trust, generosity, and collaborative decision-making. A study in Psychological Science found that physical proximity and shared experience predicted trust in groups far more reliably than formal team-building exercises. This is why decisions made on retreats stick.

Novel environments encode memories and commitments more strongly.

The brain retains insights more durably in new environments. Novelty increases dopamine activity, which improves attention, motivation, and the consolidation of memory. This is why people remember what was decided on a retreat, and follow through on it, far more than what was decided in a conference room.

Four teams. Four turning points.

Why they chose an offsite, and what changed.

01 The Post-Merger Leadership Team

Tech, 140 staff, UK

The situation

Six months after acquisition, two cultures had not yet merged. Decision-making was slow, tensions surfaced in email threads, and the CEO described the team as 'professionally polite, personally distant.'

What happened

Three days in a private Scottish estate. Structured sessions in the mornings, shared meals, long dinners. By day three they had redesigned their operating model in a way months of consultants had not managed.

Result

40% reduction in decisions escalated to the CEO in the following quarter.

02 The Scaling Founder Team

SaaS startup, Series B, Amsterdam

The situation

The founding team had built something impressive but were so deep in execution that no one was asking where the company was actually going. Three co-founders had not had a real conversation in months.

What happened

Four days in a Tuscan estate. No investor decks, no laptops. Two structured strategy sessions, the rest unstructured. A strategic disagreement that had slowed the business for a year was resolved by day two.

Result

Q3 strategy locked within 72 hours. Two product lines deprioritised, one accelerated.

03 The Retention Risk

Professional services, London, 220 staff

The situation

Three senior partners had left in 18 months. Exit interviews pointed to the same theme: they felt invisible. The managing partner knew something had to change.

What happened

Two days in the Cotswolds. No agenda beyond: slow down, eat well, talk honestly. The managing partner gave a speech at dinner she had never given in the office. It changed the room.

Result

No further senior departures in the following 12 months. Two partners cited the retreat in their decision to stay.

04 The Annual Reset

Private equity portfolio, 14-person leadership team

The situation

This team made retreats non-negotiable. Not because things were broken, but because they had seen what happened to teams that did not invest in themselves.

What happened

Rotating between Portugal, France, and Scotland. Each year a different focus: strategy, culture, individual development. The structure was consistent. The content evolved as the business did.

Result

Zero senior leadership turnover across four years. The retreats were cited consistently as a key factor in cohesion.



What Makes an Offsite Work

*"The venue creates the permission.
The design creates the result."*

Five things that separate a great offsite *from a forgettable one.*

1

Start with a clear brief, not a venue.

What needs to be different on the Monday after? Define the outcome before you choose the location. A retreat without a brief is a holiday. A retreat with one is a business decision.

2

The venue does half the work.

The right environment creates permission to think differently, say the unsaid, and slow down enough to see clearly. Research on environmental psychology consistently shows that natural, low-distraction settings reduce cognitive load and increase creative problem-solving by up to 50%.

3

Protect the unstructured time.

The best conversations happen in the margins: at dinner, on a walk, when no one has an agenda. Over-programming is the single most common mistake. The white space is where the real work happens.

4

Design the arc, not just the agenda.

Day 1 is arrival and decompression. Day 2 is the real work: strategic sessions, honest conversations. Day 3 is integration and commitment. Each phase has a different energy. Honouring the rhythm is what makes the retreat feel intentional rather than exhausting.

5

Build the follow-through before you leave.

The retreat is the investment. The return happens in the weeks after. Before departure, agree on what will be different, who owns it, and when the first check-in is. Without this, most retreats lose momentum within a fortnight.

Scotland

The Highlands and Islands

There is nowhere on earth quite like the Scottish Highlands for a leadership retreat. The scale alone does something to people.

You arrive carrying the weight of the last quarter, and then you stand at the edge of a loch that stretches further than you can see, and something in you quietly lets go.

We work with private castle and loch estates, exclusively hired, fully staffed. In-house chefs, your team, and the land. No other guests.

- Private castle and loch estates
- Exclusive hire, no other guests
- In-house chefs from local suppliers
- Dramatic Highland landscape for walks
- 1 hour from London by air (Inverness)

Best for: 12 to 30 people | May to October



Tuscany

Private Estates and The Hills

The light. The pace. The way a long lunch with good wine dissolves the walls people build around themselves at work.

We work with private estates in the Tuscan countryside, properties not on booking platforms, personally vetted, with in-house chefs and enough space for your team to breathe.

Three days here and most leadership teams accomplish more in real conversation than in six months of slide decks.

- Private villa and estate hire
- In-house chefs and sommeliers
- Wine tastings, cooking classes, truffle hunts
- Florence and Siena day visits available

Best for: 6 to 16 people | April to June, Sept to Oct

Portugal, France and The English Countryside

Portugal

Douro Valley · Sintra · Alentejo

Europe's fastest-growing retreat destination. UNESCO Heritage vineyards, 19th-century manor houses, exceptional food and wine. Uncrowded, unhurried, and genuinely special.

- Douro Valley quinta estates with river views
- Sintra gardens, 30 minutes from Lisbon
- Alentejo cork forest retreats
- Outstanding value vs comparable EU destinations

France

Loire · Burgundy · Provence

A 13th-century castle in Beaujolais with seven reception rooms. The Loire chateaux. Burgundy estates. Provencal mas hidden in the hills. France wraps itself around a group.

- Chateaux with exclusive hire from 10 guests
- Burgundy and Beaujolais wine country
- Provencal estates with private pools
- Historic properties, privately owned

England

Cotswolds · South Downs · Yorkshire

You do not need to leave England to feel a world apart. Ancient manor houses, walled kitchen gardens, and estate grounds built for exactly this kind of gathering. Closer than you think, and more beautiful than you remember.

- Manor houses with 20 or more bedrooms, exclusive hire
- Walled gardens, estate grounds and parkland
- Available for same-month and last-minute bookings

Justifying the investment

What to say when someone asks "can we afford this?"

Cost comparison	Typical range (UK)
Replacing one senior hire	GBP 30,000 to 80,000
Executive burnout cost per person per year (lost productivity and sick leave)	GBP 15,000 to 30,000
Annual executive coaching per person	GBP 3,000 to 10,000
A Sūtra retreat for your whole team	GBP 15,000 to 60,000

The question is not whether you can afford a retreat.

It is whether you can afford to keep running a leadership team that is misaligned, burned out, or quietly losing trust in each other. The cost of that, in slow decisions, disengagement, and eventual departures, dwarfs the cost of three days away.

One well-designed retreat pays for itself.

If it prevents a single senior departure, you have covered the cost three times over. If it unlocks a strategic decision that had been stuck for six months, the ROI is harder to measure but entirely real. And if it makes your leadership team feel genuinely valued, that return shows up in every meeting, every hire, and every conversation they have.

The Sūtra Difference

Most retreat companies handle logistics. We design experiences.

We start with your team, not a venue.

Most companies show you a hotel shortlist. We begin with a real conversation about what your team needs, where the tensions are, and what you want to feel differently on Monday. The venue comes after that.

We have been there first.

Every property we recommend has been personally visited. Every bedroom checked, every chef met, every route walked. No surprises. No 'it looked better in the photos.'

Nothing is off the shelf.

We do not have a catalogue. Every programme is built around your team, your brief, and your dates. The facilitation, the experiences, the meals: all designed specifically for you.

We are there when it matters.

On-site or on call throughout. You are not receiving a folder of supplier contacts and a good luck message. We coordinate every supplier, every detail, and every unexpected development.

We help you build in the follow-through.

Before departure, we help you design the commitments and agree who owns what. In the weeks after, we check in. The retreat is the catalyst. The follow-through is where change becomes permanent.

"We weave the thread."

Before, during and after.

Everything you need to get this right.

PHASE ONE

4–6+ Months Before

The Advantage Window — 6–12 months for larger teams, international programmes, or peak season

- **Secure your venue and sign contracts early**
Top-tier properties are booked months in advance. Timing determines access.
- **Define your retreat purpose and outcomes**
What should be different on Monday?
- **Align on budget, scope, and experience level**
- **Shortlist and secure exceptional locations**
The right setting shapes everything that follows.
- **Lock in high-demand facilitators or experiences**
Premium talent requires advance commitment. This is where Sūtra delivers the most value — unlocking access, curating the right environment, and designing with intention from the start.

PHASE TWO

8–12 Weeks Before

The Design & Commitment Phase — where strategy becomes structure

- **Finalise retreat flow, sessions, and key outcomes**
- **Confirm facilitators and curated experiences**
- **Coordinate travel and full logistics**
- **Align internal communications to your team**
- **Confirm final headcount and requirements**

At this stage, the foundation should already be strong — this is refinement, not reactivity.

PHASE THREE

2–4 Weeks Before

Execution Lock-In — precision replaces planning

- **Finalise the detailed run-of-show**
Complete 3–4 weeks out.
- **Confirm all vendors, timing, and contingencies**

PHASE FOUR

1–2 Weeks Before

Arrival Readiness — build anticipation and alignment

- **Distribute welcome materials**
Two weeks prior, with a one-week reminder.
- **Ensure attendees are briefed, prepared, and engaged**

PHASE FIVE

After the Retreat

Where ROI is realised — the experience doesn't end when you leave

- **Capture decisions and commitments within 48 hours**
- **Share leadership summary and next steps**
- **Schedule follow-up to maintain momentum**

BEST CASE

4–6+ Months

Full choice of venues and talent. Best outcomes. This is the window that defines what's possible.

HIGH-IMPACT

6–12 Months

For larger groups, international programmes, or peak season. Premium access and seamless execution.

STANDARD

8–12 Weeks

Achievable, but with limitations on venue choice and supplier availability.

SHORT NOTICE

Under 8 Weeks

Possible, but expect trade-offs. We work hard to find the best available — not just what's left.

The most exceptional retreats are never rushed. They are intentionally designed, thoughtfully placed, and secured early.

Let's talk.

Every Sūtra retreat starts with one conversation. No pitch, no package, no 'here's our standard offering.' Just a proper discussion about your team, your goals, and what the right retreat looks like for you.

BOOK A CALL

30 minutes · no obligation · no pitch

calendly.com/sutraretreats/retreat-discovery-call-30-min

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