

# GO WITH THE FLOW

Welcome to X Camp, where you'll leave walking the walk better than you ever have before



X Camp fireside chat might be a bit more cerebral than your average après. 📷 ERIC BERGER

**words :: Leslie Anthony**

They hunch in swimsuits on cramped wooden benches, surrounded by firewood and snow-caked boots. Some steaming, having just stepped from the sauna, sweat dripping from their noses. Others flushed, having climbed up a four-metre snowpack from an icy river, bodies pink and eyes flashing like Christmas lights. One by one they fit a space-age headband onto their skulls and sit stone still while their brainwaves download into an app on Brent Martin's phone.

The headgear is a Muse 2, a multi-sensor EEG device widely employed by neuroscience researchers that you can buy on Amazon. Marketed as a meditation aid, it provides real-time feedback on brain activity, heart rate, breathing, and body movement. In this case, users are tracking their

response to thermoregulatory stress. Can you be a more physiologically efficient sauna-er? A more meditative cold-water plunger à la Dutch specialist Wim "The Iceman" Hof? Of course, and biofeedback can help accelerate the process.

When each person is done, Martin shares their results. They nod. Then the hot clamber down to the river, and the cool head into the sauna, both with the same thought: I can do better this time. This is flow science. This is X Camp.

The ad went something like this: *Join us at X Camp, a four-day backcountry gathering to stoke the soul and awaken the spirit. We'll combine the latest neuroplasticity and brain tech with embodied experiences to help you tap into flow state and raise your game. Unplug your electronics and prepare for an exploratory journey of inner and outer discovery... ▶*



Further reading divined that on top of ski-touring, movement classes, hitting the sauna, cold-water plunging, forest bathing, meditating and varied interpersonal exchanging, a range of professionals would train an assortment of brain and body tech on participants and each other, delivering experiential learning to be converted to knowledge and action. Unstated, but of primary interest, was to learn more about flow, an emerging field centered on human endeavour and potential (its first lesson: be patient, we'll get to it).

*A balance must be struck between the challenge of the task and the skill of the performer. When both are low and matched, flow can't happen and apathy results; when both are high and matched, however, flow occurs.*

The inaugural event of Martin's Vancouver-based outfit, Backcountry Enlightenment, sounded intriguing enough for a dozen to sign on. We arrived by snowcat, snowmobile and cross-country ski to the exquisite backcountry digs of Journeyman Lodge in Whistler's Callaghan Valley, where the pros plugged in their theta-wave scanners, light/sound relaxation apparatuses, action-potential stress evaluators, various brain stimulators; and, of course, the Muse 2. More important than the array of "digiceuticals" (flow is chock-a-bloc with buzzwords), however, were the humans who could turn their powers into something useful.

In addition to organizers Martin—self-proclaimed Director of Mischief—and Greig Gjerdalen, a deep-nature explorer and instructor in Capilano University's outdoor program, X Camp featured maverick neuroscientist Dr. Ryan D'Arcy, body-movement expert Dr. Carla Cupido, somatic wizard Ian Watson, life and business architect Nick Banks, and functional medicine neuro-ninja Dr. Jan Venter.

In the lodge, we circled up for introductions and to speak to why we were there. The reasons were diverse: some felt happy in life and wanted to share, others sought personal growth, were battling health issues, had a bad year, or needed to let go of some toxic emotional narrative; a few were merely curious or there for the science. If you're wondering what any of this has to do with flow, I was, too. The question, however, was quickly answered: everything.

That first afternoon, with brilliant spring sun but a forecasted return to winter, Gjerdalen led a walk in the forest, challenging us to bring awareness to our surroundings through silence. It's amazing what you can see and hear and feel when you allow yourself to—and this then changes how you both perceive and proceed. The physics of your stride might not change, yet somehow your walking improves. Then you notice more around you. And then you feel even better physically. Positive feedback is a powerful thing, unleashing the intrinsic motivation at the heart of flow.

And now, yes, we better find out what that is.

By its nature and the things its applied to by people, the word "flow" often comes across as casual stoner talk. In fact, it boasts a solid academic pedigree.

Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi was first to recognize, study and name the concept with his seminal 1990 work, ►



Into the wild. Repetitive movements (like touring), fresh air and natural elements can all help induce a flow state. © ERIC BERGER



LEFT Brain waves in the backcountry. Hooked up to a brain stimulation device in Journeyman Lodge. RIGHT Dr. Jan Venter and Ian "Cheddar" Watson in deep flow discussion. © ERIC BERGER



*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* Flow describes the highly productive mental state in which a person becomes so focused and absorbed that nothing else seems to matter. Whether you call it being in “the zone” or in “a groove”—we have all, at some time, experienced the clarity of total engagement, fulfillment, and skill, whether while cooking, doing a puzzle, or paddleboarding. Csikszentmihalyi saw flow as complete involvement in an activity for its own sake, but in which “The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost.”

He conducted prodigious research into the components necessary to achieve a flow state, and a key finding was expressed in his idea of a challenge-skill matrix. This holds that a balance must be struck between the challenge of the task and the skill of the performer. When both are low and matched, flow can’t happen and apathy results; when both are high and matched, however, flow occurs. It’s easy to extend this to learning curves for outdoor activities and life goals—upward-leveraging skill and challenge are required to progress, yet it’s a step-wise process that must be appropriately managed and nurtured over time. The product of such patient achievement is embodied in Olympic athletes and others performing at the highest possible levels.

Like many emerging fields, flow is so new it’s caught between cult status and scientific discipline. It has its own pop-culture gurus in authors Jamie Wheal and Steven Kotler (e.g., *Stealing Fire: How Silicon Valley, the Navy SEALs, and Maverick Scientists Are Revolutionizing the Way We Live and Work*), and has been covered by the *New York Times*—“How to Hack Your Brain (for \$5,000).” But flow has also entered the learning streams at universities, where myriad research is being conducted and surprising findings made.

As Dr. Venter pointed out in an evening presentation at Journeyman, the underground “Altered State Economy” sees us spend *\$4 trillion* each year to alter our consciousness through personal growth modalities, recreational pursuits, various media, and drugs both legal and not. Flow, done right, it is claimed, can provide a hack to any of this. If this sounds as flaky as a lot of other New Age claptrap, the brain-science results unequivocally show there’s something to it.

Among brain changes measured during flow state is the expected

elevated focus, but also faster processing of information from a wider array of sources; increased neural connections, neuroplasticity, lateral thinking, and pattern recognition; a reciprocal relationship between flow and creativity; higher risk-taking; and the triggering of powerful intrinsic motivation by a flood of addictive neurochemicals. This suggests that the hackneyed expression “adrenaline junkie” might better refer to a flow junkie—the enjoyment of high performance and being as good as you can be.

Flow can cut the path to mastery (aka, Malcolm Gladwell’s 10,000 hours) 50 per cent by accelerating problem solving and learning (up to 230 per cent), performance (500 per cent), and spiking creativity (700 per cent). These are huge numbers. And right behind them is the finding that people with the most flow in their lives (looking your way Sea-to-Sky outdoor enthusiasts) are the happiest people on earth.

Back at the Journeyman, things were indeed happy. Meals were awesome, carefully curated productions, and while we ate, talk about the empirically studied benefits of various food items was a reminder of how important nutrition is for us to function optimally—and hence central to the idea of flow.

We’d started our first full day the way we would each—with a 15-minute meditation led by Martin before segueing into a movement clinic with Dr. Cupido that included breathwork, strength, stretch, and balance training, all aimed at getting to your best faster and more often. With that in mind, we set out ski-touring into what was now 20 centimetres overnight and would eventually add up to a metre. I had a great run—despite my focus on not breaking through the solar-affected crust under the new snow. Afterward I realized that my familiarity with this activity had me in a flow state throughout. Could I apply this to other areas of my life?

At various points, Watson conducted somatic investigations into sympathetic versus parasympathetic nervous responses, Banks held life-mission-analysis sessions, Dr. Venter stimulated brains, Martin collected more data at the sauna, and Gjerdalen led another round of forest bathing, this time on skis.

Did I see anything new out there? Absolutely. Could I do even better? You bet. 🍷

*X Camps have also been held in the Chilcotins and on Gambier island. The next X Camp at Journeyman Lodge is scheduled for April 2020. [xcamp.ca](http://xcamp.ca)*

## TECH FACT

After a firsthand avalanche experience, Peter Aschauer acquired the patent for **avalanche airbags** in 1980 and developed a system allowing victims to gain a sufficient increase in volume within seconds, without obstructing their ability to move.

