

CALGARY HERALD

Head for the hills: Women escape to the mountains to retreat from stress and embrace healthy living

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Byline: Robin Summerfield
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Barb Duncan is a typical modern woman.

Every weekday, the 29-year-old Calgarian teaches high school chemistry from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. After that, she picks up her 22-month-old daughter from day care and they head home, where housework and cooking beckons.

In spare moments, she tackles coursework for her master's degree in counselling psychology.

So what does Duncan do to recharge her batteries? She escapes to Lake Louise for a weekend retreat with 12 equally overscheduled and taxed women.

"It's sort of a time-out for women," says Duncan, who has brought along her mom as a surprise 60th birthday present. "This is really nice. I didn't have to worry about the cooking and cleaning for a little while."

But today's modern woman, like Duncan, isn't just putting her feet up at this recent two-day retreat at Lake Louise Inn.

In between healthy meals and snacks, the group hits the hiking trails, strikes a pose in yoga and meditation classes, works on core stability and toning during Pilates, practices balance with the yoga ball and dives in for aquafit classes in the pool. Getting away from it all includes about six hours of exercise and activity on Saturday and four hours on Sunday.

This is Mountain Escape, a health and lifestyle retreat for women. The weekend getaway is about eating well and getting the heart rate up, with a bit of pampering -- in the form of massages, pedicures, manicures and other indulgences -- thrown into the mix.

Situated amid dramatic views of the surrounding peaks, and just a short walk from Lake Louise Creek, the retreat is meant to shed the busy pace and slough off some stress, if even for a little while.

This is the 25th year the hotel has invited women to kick-start healthy living just in time for bikini season.

On this recent weekend, most of the 13 women have driven from Calgary, Okotoks and Edmonton for their weekend time out.

A handful are school teachers. There are entrepreneurs and business owners. Two are nurses. A few are retired and many are working moms.

There are sisters, mothers and daughters and friends. One woman comes alone and a pair of longtime sixtysomething friends have made the trek from Dallas and Pittsburgh to meet up for the retreat and see the Rockies for the first time.

The only worry during the weekend is to decide which fitness class to attend and when to schedule a facial. All of the activities are optional, so the women -- who range in age from 22 to 66 -- fill their own schedule.

IMAGES



Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald
(The women enjoy a workout); Doris Blais leads a hike; Anne Blishen relaxes during a massage; and a tasty dish awaits retreatants.



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"I think I'd be in a nut house if I didn't do these things," says Teresa Spinelli, 43, a business owner from Edmonton. "It is so hard in our busy lives to get that feeling of calm and peace. This helps."



Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald

Spinelli, a spa regular at properties around North America, has brought her two goddaughters and is treating the pair to the retreat as a Christmas present.

The women enjoy a workout; Doris Blais leads a hike; Anne Blishen relaxes during a massage; (and a tasty dish awaits retreatants.)

"Now, I can't not see doing this every spring and fall," adds Gail Harvey, 46, a first-time retreatant and mother of two from Edmonton.

The program, formerly called Slim Inn, has come a long way from its fat farm-like, boot campish beginnings.

The Inn still offers week-long and weekend retreats for women during spring and fall. Challenge weeks -- where women go on daily 12- to 15- kilometre hikes in the surrounding hills -- are also on the schedule. Holistic weeks combine the regular exercise program with more meditative fare, such as group trail walks in silence. Yoga and meditation is also emphasized during holistic weeks.



Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald

Doris Blais leads women through a fit ball workout at a spa retreat at Lake Louise Inn.

The focus on weight loss has been dramatically de-emphasized as the program has evolved over the years.

First day in, women aren't weighed, measured and calipered to determine body fat percentage as they were in the early years. Those few extra pounds -- if they've taken up residence on the booty -- are less important here today. The pervasive attitude is healthy living. Being active rather than skeletal is the message.

While the modern menu is health-conscious, the portions are a bit more generous than the mini-meals and low-fat plates that were served 25 years ago.

Instead of cottage cheese and serious amounts of rabbit food -- the norm during the aerobics and low-fat craze during the spa's beginnings -- today's retreatants pick and choose from a standard breakfast buffet.

For lunch, an appetite-satisfying tuna wrap and a Greek salad or teriyaki beef stir-fry with Asian noodles hits the spot.

Not exactly Atkins-friendly or low-carb, but a reasonable, healthy meal nonetheless.

For dinner, grilled salmon with lime cucumber salsa, herbed rice pilaf, glazed carrots and crisp asparagus is served. A slice of killer cheesecake with some fresh fruit is the decadent finishing touch. And a glass of crisp pinot gris or a favourite red is not frowned upon here.

The idea is moderation, not starvation.

"It's more relaxed and the emphasis is on health, the outdoors and active living," says fitness guide Debbi Mustard, 49, who has been with the program for the past decade.

She started out as a participant in 1990, she recalls, and loved it so much she signed on to lead walks and hikes a few years later.

The retreat has moved away from the lose-pounds-or-die-trying feeling, she says.

"That's not really a positive way to look at things."

That message -- avoid the all or none mentality -- is also driven home by fitness instructor Doris Blais during a yoga ball class.

"If you take just one or two things from the weekend, that's great," Blais, 45, tells her sweaty students. It's about trying new exercise programs to see what fits and what you enjoy doing, she says.

Alongside the murky and swift Lake Louise Creek during a rainy 10-kilometre trail walk Saturday afternoon, Mustard, who guides the group, offers some further advice.

"Bottle up that sound and take it home with you," she tells her charges as they navigate a footbridge over the waters.

For busy mom, teacher, student and wife Barb Duncan, the weekend has been non-stop.

She's taken ball class and Pilates, aquasized in the pool and hit the trails near the hotel. She has also managed to fit in a facial and went on an extra run.

Modern woman syndrome dies hard, after all.

But even though she will hit her full working mother stride soon enough, the weekend retreat will stay with her, Duncan vows Sunday afternoon as she prepares to head back home to Calgary.

"I feel like I can handle everything again," she says. "I feel re-energized."

rsummerfield@theherald.canwest.com

Plan Your Retreat

The next Mountain Escape is June 12 to 17. A weekend retreat will be held June 17 to 19.

A week costs \$795 for double occupancy or \$995 single occupancy. The weekend escape costs \$269 for double occupancy or \$349 single occupancy. The Lake Louise Inn also offers a mother and daughter rate for a reduced price.

The fall retreats start Sept. 16 and run until the end of October.

Visit www.lakelouiseinn.com for more information or call 1-800-661-9237 or 403-522-3791.

Illustration:

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