

The goddesses celebrate their true transformations.



Embrace your Goddess Self

Take a journey embodying the goddess through sweat, ceremony, and sisterhood

by Felicia M. Tomasko

It was not my usual preparation for an evening out: searching through my suitcase and cabin for the necessary accouterments to transform myself into Freya, the Scandinavian goddess of sexuality. I was one of a group of women on a weeklong retreat, morphing into the form of a goddess in body, mind, and spirit. It was an amazing sight, 25 of us decked in the adornments of spontaneous goddess-hood—fresh flowers, a crown of braided rosemary, bindis carefully arranged on bare skin, feathers and make-up, and artfully draped sarongs. Our evening as the goddess embodied completed our last

night together, the culmination of nearly a week of our goddess bootcamp with Sierra Bender at Mount Madonna Center in Northern California.

The retreat's announcements, with facilitator Sierra Bender in a fierce posture as a fatigue-clad superhero, gave the impression that our week together would involve numerous push-ups and constant sweat, challenging our limits. In reality, the limits we encountered were not necessarily the ones we expected. We came face-to-face with our preconceived notions about what it means to be fit, to be a woman, to feel safe in the world, to experience

our own sense of power, to express the fullness of our own voice, and to be both comfortable and at ease in our own bodies. Bootcamp for Goddesses is not a military-style set of exercises—it's a bootcamp for the spirit.

Tales of the goddess

Our time together was book-ended in ceremonies where we sat together in a circle. On the first night, we were strangers, tentative. Walking into a grove of redwood trees on the retreat center's sacred ground, Sierra burned sage, and we sang and chanted. She explained the archetypes of the goddess and how traditions worldwide have identified aspects of a woman's persona in the deities such as Freya, Demeter (the Greek earth mother and keeper of the harvest), Maya (the Sanskrit name for illusion and creation), Saraswati (wisdom), Laksmi (abundance), Kali (transformation), Pele (the Hawaiian goddess of creation, fire, and the volcano), or Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love). We each chose a goddess card with a lesson for us to contemplate, a goddess for us to become.

Throughout the week, the nametag we designed announced our goddess-self, but we gradually learned each other's given names, our stories, our desires, and our challenges. We got to see another side of ourselves through a series of partner exercises that challenged attention and spirit through gazing into each other's eyes, listening, and repeating through reflection. We blended essential oils with carefully attuned aromatherapeutic benefits and then traded massages. We slowed down to practice energy work with each other. In our time together, we discussed food, the Ayurvedic principles of nutrition and how to really *nourish*—not just feed—ourselves, a concept we practiced at the long communal tables brimming with our daily feast.

And we did sweat. Each morning before breakfast, we'd take

a vigorous and totally silent hike, where we could only smile encouragement as every excursion became slightly more challenging. Yet the walk was not merely an exercise in muscle contraction but in slowing down, noticing nature, feeling the Earth Mother beneath our feet and embodied in the trees overhead. We stretched and sang and bathed ourselves in sage smoke before venturing out under the redwoods' canopy.

Balancing asanas

A daily yoga practice was one of our bootcamp activities. While some of us on the mat were regular practitioners (and even teachers), others were trying asana for the first time. Sierra's instruction went beyond basic alignment to explore the energetics of the pose in terms of their effects on the chakras (energy centers), reproductive organs, and even our state of mind. The time on the mat, Sierra asserted, should encourage a state of balance rather than serve as yet another competitive outlet for the often-aggressive nature we may inhabit if we forget our goddess selves.

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Sierra Bender leads the troops through our daily yoga practice.



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After all, it was the goddess—internal and external—Sierra encouraged us to cultivate, to see, to be, to inhabit in each one of our varied activities. The deep exploration of the week reached its climax in the sweat lodge we experienced together. In one afternoon, we wove the branches, prepared the area and then, when the rocks were sufficiently cooked, Miriam the medicine woman led us to sing, sweat, and embody our prayers, wishes, hopes, fears, and dreams in the safety of the dark cave, the body of the Earth herself. As we crawled out, hot, smiling, hungry, we laughed over dinner.

Each one of us, in one way or another, faced our perceived limits in the dark, in the heat, in the transformative time together. Something had broken free in all of us, a feeling that we would remember as we danced our goddess, and one we would treasure after we returned home with new voice and attitude. 🙏

For more info about **Sierra Bender's Bootcamp for Goddesses**, visit bootcampforgoddesses.com. For Mount Madonna's schedule, visit mountmadonna.org.

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