

Boot Camp for Goddesses!

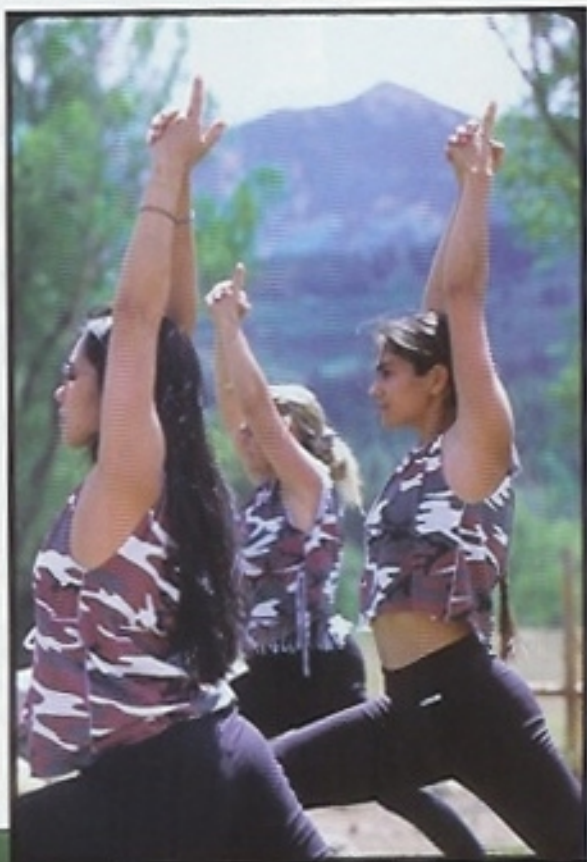
by Susan Houriet

I am in child's pose, my face pressed into soft white sheepskin, the sun warming my back. Wind rustles the leaves of a nearby stand of towering white aspens. Yesterday, I was at work in the concrete canyons of Manhattan, surrounded by towering buildings. Now, the nearest paved road is several miles away. The Mountain Spirit Lodge, my home for a week, has a raised triangular grassy area outside the 6,000-square-foot lodge—the perfect spot for *down dog*. There, for two hours most mornings, a dozen women and I practice camel, warrior and bridge poses under the watch of our fearless leader, Sierra Bender. Also watching over us are the snow-tipped mountains of Navajo Peak and the Banded Peaks between which this 4,000-acre ranch is nestled.

My adventure started when Beverly, a university professor friend, asked me to join her at a yoga retreat called *Boot Camp for Goddesses* out in the wild, wild West. Coming from Manhattan, my idea of boot camp is when my elevator is on the fritz and I have to climb five flights of stairs to my apartment. While I'd taken some yoga classes before, frankly I was more into toning my triceps than realizing enlightenment. I was excited about the prospect of yoga and outdoor activities, but wary about the whole 'Boot Camp' and 'Goddess' aspects. So my decision to go for it was, in itself, a leap of faith.

On the first night we gathered on a blanket of sheepskins in front of a roaring fire in the main lodge. We introduced ourselves and sipped glasses of red wine. Sierra showed us a deck of cards featuring Goddesses from American Indian, Celtic and other traditions, and asked each of us to choose one. "What you chose will reflect something within you," she explained, "that you need to recognize and share." She spread the cards facedown in the middle of our circle. Suspending disbelief, I moved my hands over the cards until I felt one that seemed kind of...warm...and turned it over. My fellow Goddesses, seeing the shock on my face, started to giggle. I was staring at a naked old lady with long stringy white hair, skin hanging off her bones, her legs open wide. Other participants had cards with beautiful, wise Goddesses—and I was supposed to connect with this scary old lady?

It turned out that Sheila-na-gig, 'my' Goddess, was one cool chick. She's the Goddess of fertility in British-Celtic mythology, and her genital display is symbolic of the power of female sexuality and reproduction to ward off death and evil. Nevertheless, she did take a little getting used to. The Goddess' mantra was "opening," and so over the next few days I surrendered to the possibility that I had chosen Sheila-na-gig for a reason, and worked on opening my heart to my yoga practice, the wonderful



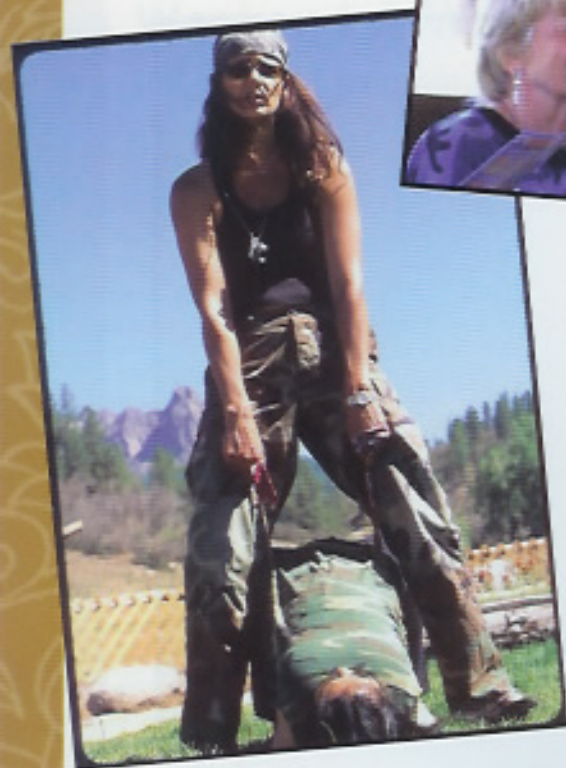
women around me and the possibilities of my life.

The slogan for the retreat is "bringing women together for laughter, tears and sweat." I experienced each in abundance. We practiced yoga, hiked, made our own aromatherapy blends, rode on horseback and did a lot of group exercises. When someone sneezed it quickly became "Goddess bless you." I didn't cry as much as some or have any huge emotional breakthroughs. I did fall asleep during a chakra meditation. I also ate a lot, laughed and learned, and had a damn good time.

The retreat packed an amazing amount of activities into seven days and nights. Maybe it was the two hours of yoga a day or the mountain air, but I never felt rushed, tired or over-stimulated. As with the name itself, *Boot Camp for Goddesses* was just the right mix of work and pampering. A grueling six-mile hike to a beautiful waterfall would be followed by a hot soak in the mineral pools at Pagosa Springs.

Once we drank copious amounts of wine, wrapped colorful scarves around our waists and had belly dancing instruction in the late afternoon sunlight. Another afternoon was devoted to massage and facials on the deck of the River Lodge, a rambling, renovated 1800's fishing lodge. The rooms in the main lodge, with a three-story-tall living room and the 35-foot tall fireplace, were downright luxurious (fluffy duvets and claw-foot bathtubs). But





nothing beat coming back to our rustic lodge after a long day to strip with my fellow Goddesses and sink into a hot tub right on the banks of the Navajo River.

For our "graduation" ceremony we dressed up as our Goddesses (I chose a younger, clothed version of Sheila-na-gig) and carried candles at dusk to an enormous labyrinth made of stones that Sierra and the ranch hands had painstakingly constructed. As darkness fell we walked the labyrinth three times and then stood in a circle in the center around a bonfire. The next night, our last, we participated in an American Indian sweat lodge.

The yoga incorporated elements of several branches of traditional yoga that Sierra has studied, including Kundalini, Kripalu and White Tantric Yoga. Nature was very much a part of our practice. When we did the mountain pose, mountains surrounded us. When we did the tree, we focused on actual trees in order to help maintain our balance. "The most powerful Goddess is Mother Nature," Sierra assured us. "We're here as women to connect with nature and that power of nature that is within us." Some sessions we would only do five or so postures, holding each for a long time. The attention to correct alignment and the meditative aspect of staying in poses made it into a physical and spiritual workout unlike any that I've had before or since.

One thing was for sure: I never got bored. I developed strength that I didn't know I had. And I found a little peace to carry back with me to the big city—feeling a bit more, well, Goddess-like.



When not doing headstands, **Susan Houriet** works as a web site editor in New York City. She grew up in Vermont, went to the Columbia School of Journalism and lives near Central Park with her Abyssinian cat, Billy.

Boot Camp for Goddesses is held at different locations. For more: 970.264.9074, sierrayoga.com, sierrayoga@frontier.net