

Hike for health at spa

ADVENTURE SPA | Arizona dietitian wants guests to maintain healthy lifestyle

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Lots of spa retreats do a great job getting guests to eat right and exercise while they're there. But as soon as they get home and unpack, it's back to nightly dates with Ben & Jerry and other bad habits.

Devon Metz watched this pattern play out repeatedly during her years working at some of the most high-end destination spas in the country.

The 31-year-old dietitian and fitness instructor figured there had to be a better way to help guests keep a healthy lifestyle going long after checkout. Late last year, Metz began offering six-day getaways aimed at just that. Held in the sunny, Southwest city of Tucson, Ariz., Devon Hiking Spa vacations focus on nutrition and fitness in a "real world" way, Metz said.

"Most places just put a plate in front of you and you're not really learning how to eat out and make the right choices," she said. "We take people out to real restaurants each night and have them navigate the menu. We do a supermarket tour and learn how to really read the ingredient list.

"We try to do the same thing with exercise," Metz added. "We'll use a resistance band instead of heavy equipment and give them the band to take home with a list of exercises to do."

The idea of a week away from the office hiking past saguaro cacti in the Arizona mountains, learning how to have a better diet and enjoying some relaxing massages sounded like the perfect escape to Ellen McGann. This Hinsdale banking executive deserved an escape. The 48-year-old mother had recently wrapped up eight rounds of chemotherapy and 28 radiation treatments after having surgery for breast cancer.

"I viewed it as the ultimate detox," McGann said. "I'd wanted to do a health spa thing my entire life. I thought, 'Why not just take a week off work and focus on myself, focus on diet, exercise and healthy living?' "



Ellen McGann (left) and her hiking group take a snack break. There were hikes for beginners as well as advanced trekkers.

McGann was one of 12 who signed up for the inaugural Devon Hiking Spa vacation in December. Most of the guests were women, ranging in age from their late 20s to 50s. And most were like McGann, traveling on their own. Base camp was the swanky Loews Ventana Canyon Resort in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains.

A typical day started around 7 a.m. with a half-hour of stretching followed by breakfast in the hotel. Then it was time for an hour-long class that usually revolved around nutrition. After that, everyone laced up their hiking boots and hit the trail, where people had the option of choosing between guided hikes for beginners or advanced trekkers.

Guests who wanted more of a fitness fix could take a post-hike class in pilates, yoga or strength-building resistance bands and then treat their sore muscles to a massage; two spa treatments came with the package.

In the evening, everyone got together for dinner at a local restaurant to practice what was preached.

"Every night before dinner we went over what to order, what questions to ask," McGann said. "You do things like mindful eating exercises, where you put your fork down between every bite."

"A lot of the stuff I learned I came home and taught my husband," she added. "We tend to go out to dinner a lot. I'm not afraid anymore to ask the restaurant for something special, like putting the sauce on the side or skipping the breading. My husband's lost about 15 pounds since I got back."

During her stint in Tucson, McGann tried Pilates for the first time. She liked it so much, she now does it once a week. She's also making a weekly visit to a personal trainer.

"I'm still working on the exercise thing," McGann said. "It's my worst category."

About once every three weeks, McGann gets an e-mail from Metz asking how she's doing and whether she's meeting her goals.

"I love the follow-up," said McGann, who plans to show Metz her progress in person when she takes another Devon Hiking Spa vacation later this year.

McGann finished her cancer treatments a year ago this month.

She said that when you're in the midst of battling something as formidable as cancer, "you don't feel like you're ever going to get on the other side . . . focusing on myself and my health during that week helped push me to the other side."

Take a hike

GETTING THERE: Fly into Tucson International Airport.

PRICE: Devon Hiking Spa vacations cost \$2,900 per person, based on double occupancy. Solo travelers tack on \$500 for their own room. The price includes five nights at Loews Ventana Canyon Resort, all meals, two spa services, airport departure shuttle, backpack, pedometer and other little extras.

DATES: Eight trips are scheduled this year. They are: May 23-28; June 25-30; July 11-16; July 25-30; Nov. 16-21; Nov. 30-Dec. 5; Dec. 7-12; Dec. 14-19

FOR MORE INFO: Call (888) 823-2303 or visit www.devonhikingspa.com.