

Big Sky Yoga Retreat brings bonding and bliss

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By **NICOLA BRIDGES** The San Diego Union-Tribune
Fri., April 13, 2018

Lounging in a sleeping bag on a cot in a teepee, fully clothed and bundled up, my cowboy boots kicked off on the warm wooden floor, I've been journaling and listening to the ever-changing Montana weather make music on my tent. The wind whistles through the flaps. The rain taps a rhythm on the canvas. The dramatic, fast-moving Montana cloudscape creates a flickering light show through the slits. I hear the lunch call, and just as I emerge, sunshine lights the grey sky, revealing a luminescent double rainbow.

I'm at Luxe Cowgirl Yoga with Big Sky Yoga Retreats at the Double T River Ranch in Clyde Park, Mont., an hour from Bozeman, and I'm seriously starting to think the stunning weather has been specially choreographed as the backdrop for what transpires to be a very special retreat.

For a gal with a horse and a meditative mind on a mission to feel less stressed, an equestrian-themed yoga vacation seemed like a dream. But Cowgirl Yoga is so much more than tree poses and trails. Bring 12 women together in a breathtaking barn on a beautiful ranch, wrapped in the hug of the outdoors, and very naturally a sisterhood emerges. It's the perfect making of a magical gathering and a weekend of female bonding, laughter, love, a few tears — and more than a little wine.

“I wanted to offer an experience where women can just hang and be themselves and, only if they want to, explore the space between taking care of everyone else and feeling guilty tending to their own sense of self,” explains Margaret Burns Vap, who began Big Sky Yoga Retreats 10 years ago. “My hope is to give women ideas how to infuse happiness into the daily cacophony of their lives, and find that feeling they had here in their own day to day. For me, that's yoga, being in nature, eating healthy, being with my animals, finding inspiring people, and reading inspiring things.”

This is not a bonding of earthy hippie women dancing through lush green Montana meadows, naked with flowers in their hair. We're a diverse bunch of smart women: teachers, executives, housewives and moms, from the East Coast, California, North Dakota and as far away as France. Some came in small coteries, others solo, and we're all here for the horses, yoga, downtime and delicious farm-fresh organic food prepared by an on-ranch chef. We know we'll leave calmer than we came. We just don't know the freeing and profound effect it will have on our lives, if we just let it.

Burns Vap, who ran her own yoga studio for years, exudes serenity with a side of sassy horsewoman “Heck yeah!” She has a gift for reading the vibe of the group and guiding the weekend flow to fit.

After settling into our lodgings, we gather in the Double T's beautifully renovated barn lounge over refreshingly crisp cocktails. Fanning a deck of cards, but without showing their horse illustrations, Burns Vap asks us to take one. It's for a cool journaling exercise, “but only if you want to.” Nonparticipation often brands you as an outsider at retreats. Burns Vap prefers, like her yoga, to let things flow. The wonderful effect is that everyone wants to join in.

The cards accompany a book, *Way of the Horse: Equine Archetypes for Self-Discovery — A Book of Exploration*, by Linda Kohanov, and each features a state of mind or emotion — adventurous, longing, lost, happiness, joy, even depression — with a matching chapter reflecting on the equine-human connection. We look at our cards with knowing nods, some smiles, some puzzlement and intrigue.

“Perhaps,” Burns Vap says soothingly, “perhaps tonight just reflect on it. Tomorrow, maybe jot down how it resonates with you. At our goodbye barn brunch, if you feel like sharing your thoughts, you can. But no pressure.”

We head to our beds, ready to greet the sunrise with salutations in the magnificent barn-loft studio, easing our way into the day before saddling up and moseying along the lush Gallatin River trails, spotting an elk, and a bear on the opposite bank. We’re free to just be — Burns Vap allowing us to relax, brush and bond with the horses, lie in the meadow, take a walk and just, well, be.

By the second evening, we feel we’ve known each other for years. By the third, we’re swapping recipes and lounging around in our PJs in each other’s luxuriously cozy cabins, some of us bundling up and sneaking to the corral for goodnight horse kisses under the ink-black, starlit sky.

It’s bliss and it’s over too quickly. At brunch we quietly hug our goodbyes, promising to reunite on another idyllic Big Sky Yoga Retreat in Montana, Costa Rica, Patagonia or Italy. Burns Vap looks on smiling. “Success, for me, is satisfying our craving for connection.” For us, she’s clearly done that, and then some.

IF YOU GO

Big Sky Yoga Retreats: www.bigskyyogaretreats.com. Yoga and riding levels: Novices and pros welcome. Beyond ponies and yoga pants: Cowgirl Yoga retreats in 2018 theme by location. There's surfing in Costa Rica, hiking in Patagonia, fly fishing in Montana and wine tasting in Italy.

Big Sky weather:

Pack layers, a pashmina, lip balm and lotion.

The glorious High Plains perform a daily weather dance of sunshine, storm bursts, even summer snow flurries. Blue skies and high-20s can quickly turn thunderous and frigid, and back to toasty in 20 minutes. Nightly temps drop below 5 year-round.

You'll be close to 5,000 feet in elevation, looking at 7,200-foot mountaintops. Drink plenty of water and keep those lips moist. It's no fun feeling like a light-headed lizard.

Stay a day:

Don't miss out on buzzing downtown Bozeman — 20 blocks of galleries, Western outfitters, cool breweries, coffee bars and co-op to gourmet eats.

The Lark, a relaxed modern-retro hotel with a unique outdoors motif and staff called Field Guides, offers a Cowgirl Yogini discount.