

Working Vacation

True confessions of a male spa-goer. By Lawrence Savell

The warning signs were clear—my secretary began spraying nonstick cooking spray on the doorway to my office to facilitate my passing. Maitre 'd's instinctively seated me at a booth for four even at the height of the lunchtime rush. Yes, I had gained a few pounds.

Unfortunately, losing weight had never been easy for me. What I needed was an environment where I would be forced to exercise vigorously and eat nutritiously. I had no desire to enlist in the Armed Forces, though, so I decided to check out an ad in a health magazine for a fitness spa. What proved most difficult, however, was shaking my mental picture of spas—places where wealthy women while away their free time encased in mud and wearing turbans.

My research led me in several different directions. Some spas only admit women. Others were purely "pampering" places, where guests spent their entire day being rubbed and buffed by skinny people. I further eliminated all spas located anywhere I knew someone. (I didn't think my friends would understand my spending my vacation paying someone *not* to feed me.) I finally chose a small, nondescript "fitness resort" located far from any pizza parlor, sweet shop or any of the other necessities of life.

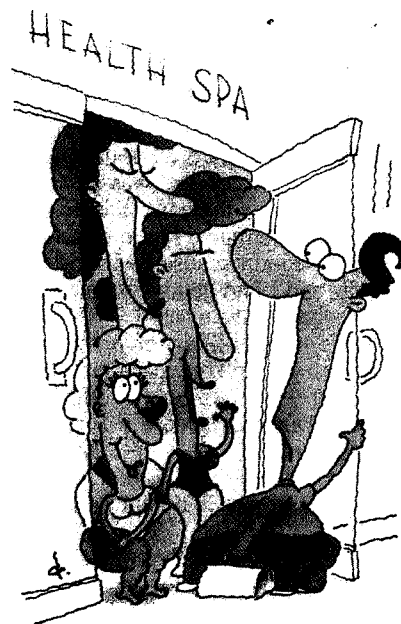
On my first day at the spa, I was awakened by the ringing of the telephone. At the other end was a woman who announced that it was 6:00 A.M., and time for my morning hike. (My brain, still fuzzy from sleep, prompted me to wonder—maybe I *had* joined the army.) I lifted the shade from the window, confirming that it was, indeed, still pitch black outside. Blindly, I put on my grey sweatsuit and faithful battered sneakers and headed out the door to get fit.

I encountered a group of about 25 women, ranging in age from approximately their mid-20's to over 50, all dressed in brightly-colored leggings and oversized T-shirts. I was the only man.

Suddenly I felt self-conscious. Should I have shaved? Should I have shaved my legs? Mercifully, one of the women smiled at me; then all of the others did the same. I smiled back—I had been

accepted. For a week I could feel like Richard Gere.

The hike, which consisted of me following the others from an increasing distance while gaining a thorough understanding of the word "hyperventilation," mercifully ended just as a bell signaled breakfast. I staggered to the dining room looking forward to a hearty meal. Pacing myself, I stretched my portion to four swallows. I then checked the schedule to



determine the earliest time that lunch would be available.

After allowing a sufficient period for our stomachs to digest our morning feast, it was time for stretch class. This consisted of everyone lying on the floor and putting together parts of the body that had no business *ever* coming within two feet of each other. We were instructed to touch our toes; I could touch my knees. We were told to spread our feet into a big "V" and slowly lower our chins toward the ground; I could bring mine about an inch closer to the ground than where it had been when I was sitting upright. Within the first five minutes, I had already burned off breakfast.

For diversion, the spa provided lectures

on subjects such as nutrition and food preparation, including how to substitute common household materials for traditional fattening ingredients. The lectures also emphasized the importance of water in the diet; not only did it fill you up, it also resulted in a significant occupying of your free time for several hours thereafter. The spa also conducted a field trip to a local supermarket (although guests had to be blindfolded during the drive and were frisked upon return).

As the days passed, during each morning hike, I began to seriously consider commandeering the local school bus that passed us every day and making off with as many lunch boxes as I could carry. The farm animals that formerly approached us now retreated a safe distance after apparently discerning an excessively desirous look in my eyes. I began to wonder if humans could digest grass.

Finally, the week was over, and it was time to return to the world of those who eat regularly. As I headed out to the airport, my box lunch of an apple and half a seaweed sandwich firmly in hand, I felt a new sense of purpose: I was going to stick with this. And I have. In the time since my initial spa experience, I have dropped and maintained a loss of 20 pounds and two suit sizes.

But with that loss, I gained something from my experience as well: an understanding that the "spa experience" offers an atmosphere where you can endure the indignities of food deprivation and feverish exertion tolerably. In essence, to me, a spa is like a 24-hour Weight Watchers meeting, where participants mutually encourage each other—often with just a nod or a smile—to push themselves to finally attain the goals they have long desired but rarely, if ever, achieved.

So now, along with my weekly meetings, an annual spa visit has become part of my weight-loss strategy. I still have a hard time considering it a "vacation" (and explaining it to my friends), but I wouldn't give up my spa experience for all the seaweed sandwiches in Atlantis.

Lawrence Savell is an attorney and writer in New York City.