

TRAVEL

Living well at Canyon Ranch in the Berkshires

BY JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

At Canyon Ranch in the Berkshires, which stands midway between New York City and Boston, it's exotic to be from the Midwest. "You came all the way from Detroit?" is the standard response of its East Coast, heavily New York clientele. They are incredulous when you tell them that by taking the 7:05 a.m. flight to Albany, you can be at "the Ranch" in time to make an 11 a.m. aerobics class, have lunch, and join an afternoon bike ride.

In fact, once Canyon Ranch opened in Lenox, Mass., in 1989, I never returned to the original Canyon Ranch in Tucson, Ariz. I look forward to spending several days each year at its accessible, elegant sister spa, named the best in the world by the readers of Conde Nast Traveler magazine.

Part of its allure is the setting — the former Bellefontaine (beautiful fountain) Mansion — built in 1897 as a replica of Louis XVI's Petit Trianon in Versailles, France. As the summer home of New York millionaire Giraud Foster, it was known for its fountains and statuary. Unfortunately, the statuary was reportedly plowed under as pagan symbols by the religious order that bought the property at auction in 1946. A fire gutted the main building two years later, with just the library surviving.

The mansion and gardens have been painstakingly restored, new fountains installed, and the integrity of the original architecture maintained even as a spa and facilities to house and feed 300 guests were added. It definitely retains a sense of its past grandeur.

I've experienced Canyon Ranch in the Berkshires every season except summer. Winter is my favorite.

Picture relaxing in a hot tub in a luxurious glassed-in marble



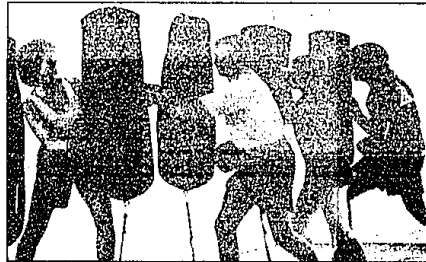
spa looking out at the snow-covered Berkshire Mountains. Picture pole-walking along the snow-covered path surrounding the storied mansion. Picture evenings before a roaring fire, in the mansion's original library or snuggled up in your own well-appointed room.

The atmosphere is eastern and elegant, but don't get me wrong — people still sweat and wear sweats. Everyone works out at his own level — and work-out clothes are suitable, even at dinner, unless you choose to "dress up" in pants or jeans and a sweater.

I found that four days and three nights add up to a perfect ranch stay. It's long enough to make a difference in your attitude and fitness, but not so long that you can't keep up the pace you've set for yourself.

The idea is to nurture your spirit as well as your body. Included in your package are two services such as a shiatsu massage and an herbal body wrap, and a health-and-healing session. This is your opportunity to try acupuncture or bio-feedback, have your bone density tested or consult with a nutrition specialist.

In fact, I've experienced a



Outdoor exercise: The action — and sweat — are just as real inside.

number of firsts at Canyon Ranch. I tried spinning, tai boxing and double step there, well ahead of when metro Detroit's gyms and sports clubs offered them.

Each day begins with a dilemma — should you get up to take one of the early morning walks. In winter, it's particularly daunting since it's both cold and dark. These are not ambling, leisurely kinds of walks, these

are WALKS — the fastest and longest, 45 minutes at a 10-11 minute per mile pace.

The rewards are great for those who make the effort. By the time you're half way up the hilly road to the center of Lenox, you're taking off your gloves and pushing up your sleeves. The picturesque New England town unfolds as the sun comes up with its gabled inns and colonial cottages. Back at the ranch, you

cool down by stretching on the verandah overlooking the surrounding pastures, forests and mountains.

Then it's into the elegant dining room, where you can choose from a wide assortment of morning foods. I'm not a breakfast eater, but I can't resist the fresh fruit and warm muffins that you help yourself to — marked with the calories and fat grams contained. Each day also features a breakfast special such as banana bread French toast (385 calories, 7 fat grams), maple walnut crusted oatmeal (366 calories, 8 fat grams) or vegetable and cheese frittata (85 calories, 3 fat grams).

Meals are, as you might guess, a highlight. The food is sophisticated, beautiful and delicious. It's included in your package, so you can have as much or as little as you want. Of course, many people come to drop a couple of pounds. It's not that hard when you can choose a grilled portobello sandwich with peppers and Wasabi mayonnaise (315 calories and 5 fat grams) for lunch or chicken satay with apricot peanut sauce (290 calories and 5 fat grams) for dinner.

When I first began going to the Tucson ranch, alcohol, caffeine and substitute sugar products (including my beloved Diet Coke) were banned. When the Lenox ranch opened, as the story goes, the clientele didn't put up with that. So now you can ask for — and get — caffeinated teas and coffee, and substitutes for sugar. However alcohol is not served — nor Diet Coke! And don't even think about smoking.

In winter, or on rainy days in other seasons, you can spend fully satisfactory days without going outside. Climate-controlled, glass-enclosed walkways connect all facilities. You can take a wide variety of aerobics, weight, conditioning, stretch and yoga classes. A gym to die for, glassed-in swimming pool, indoor tennis and volleyball

courts, and indoor track (although they don't encourage running) are other diversions. And of course the spa offers sauna, steam, whirl pools and an icy dip pool — and as often as not a glimpse of Mary Tyler Moore, Joanne Woodward or Calista Flockhart waiting in their white terry robes for a massage.

For me, the most exciting part of Canyon Ranch is hiking in the Berkshire Mountains. Some hikes take in sections of the Appalachian Trail, so you actually get a sense of that 2,100-mile walk through America's woodlands that runs from Georgia to Maine. Many of the hikes are not for the faint of heart, and it's important not to overrate your ability.

They are ranked from 1 to 6 in order of ascending difficulty. Hikes go on in even in winter, as long as it isn't icy. When there's enough snow, cross country and downhill skiing are also offered.

Night-time activities, if you can stay awake for them, can be a seminar to improve your golf game or your relationship with your mother or daughter. Many are given by visiting experts.

Men make up about a fourth of the guests. My husband, frankly, would not enjoy it. So I go with female friends or with one of my daughters. It helps that they offer a half-price special for any child older than 14. It also is an easy place to go as a single person.

Canyon Ranch is a pricey vacation. Some area travel agents put together a Monday-Thursday package at a discount rate. It's worth checking out. If you decide to go, be prepared to respond to "You came all the way from Detroit?"

- Destination: Canyon Ranch in the Berkshires
- Location: Lenox, Mass.
- Information: (800) 742-9000

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