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Among friends

Women hit the road together to leave the stress behind

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Nayara Hotel in Costa Rica (Handout / February 26, 2011)

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By Sally Horchow, Special to Tribune Newspapers
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For Becky Wallace and Judi McCormick, each a mom of three from Yorktown, Va., New Year's Eve has become even more of a celebration: It's the day their husbands unveil the spa destination they've chosen as a gift for their wives' annual girls week. This year, the men chose so well — with a customized program at Mii Amo, a luxury spa in the high desert of Sedona, Ariz. — that Wallace and McCormick want it again for next year. And that's even with rates for a three-night program starting at \$1,990.

Destination spas, which are ever-popular for groups of women seeking girlfriend getaways, are as varied these days as women are. The key is in matching a spa's focus with the group's.

Wallace and McCormick like that their annual spa trip transforms them into adventurers, trying activities, such as rock-climbing, far removed from their everyday lives.

At Mii Amo, guests choose from five "journeys," such as Healthy Body and Balance or Spiritual Exploration, with a tailored combination of services ranging from reflexology massage to past-life-regression hypnosis. Each day, guests are invited to meet in the Crystal Grotto for a morning meditation to set their intentions for the day.

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"We were able to sample from the best of both worlds: physical and spiritual," Wallace said.

Women's groups on a mission to lose weight or break unhealthy habits can choose a spa with more of a wellness focus. At The Oaks at Ojai, a fitness spa founded in 1977 in Ojai, Calif., 90 miles north of Los Angeles, guests stick to a low-fat, 1,000-to-1,200 calorie per day menu.

However structured the meal plan, The Oaks offers many choices in other ways, as well as value: Rates start at \$195 per person per night and include 15 optional fitness classes daily, hikes, evening activities and lectures, meals and snacks. The comfortable Spanish Mission Revival-style rooms can accommodate three people.

Undergoing pampering treatments combined with outdoor physical activity, rather than working out in a gym or class, was the goal of Ruth Gilinski and her two girlfriends when they chose to commemorate one of their 50th birthdays at Nayara Hotel in Costa Rica (casitas start at \$199). Surrounded by rain forest near the Arenal Volcano, Nayara's newly renovated casitas, open-air spa treatment rooms, and pool bar served as the evening home base for Gilinski's group, which spent most of their day horseback riding through waterfalls, walking on hanging bridges, zip-lining through the trees or hiking to the volcano. Then they would return to Nayara for spa treatments and cocktail hour in the hotel's Italian-inspired wine bar.

"Doing something physical together really bonds your friendship," Gilinski said.

Seekers of a luxury outdoor experience who don't want to travel outside the country have a new option in Spa Montage, which opened in December in the mountains above Park City, Utah. Although the 35,000-square-foot spa is inside the grand ski-in/ski-out Montage Deer Valley Hotel, rather than a destination on its own, a special Montage Spa Memories package (starting at \$495 per night) caters to friends traveling together and includes deluxe accommodations for two, breakfast and two 60-minute spa treatments per day.

There are so many outdoor activities — from skiing, snowshoeing, and ice skating in the winter to hiking, biking and fly-fishing in the summer — that Spa Montage's signature treatments are designed especially for weary limbs coming off the mountain. And spa guests enjoy all-day access to the steam room, sauna and Grecian-style indoor lap pool area, where they can look out at the Uinta Mountains.

Hotel spas such as Spa Montage, where guests can take advantage of amenities not related to the spa, such as gourmet restaurants or cultural attractions, are perfect for girlfriend groups with varied interests. And for women who want to vacation with a large dose of nightlife, shopping and action to balance with their pampering, a city hotel spa is even better.

Although a spa vacation in Las Vegas sounds antithetical, the sculptural sandstone walls of the Sahara Spa and Hammam, in the west tower of the 2,995-room Cosmopolitan (rooms start at \$195), redefine "oasis." The hammam, or large steam bath, is the focal point of the 43,000-square-foot facility, where as many as four people can relax on the heated stone loungers, plunge into the separate steam and cold-water pools and receive a scrub massage.

Sahra also has a state-of-the-art fitness facility, a salon, and private Sahara Suites that can be rented out by groups of four to eight people who want to enjoy their spa and salon services together. In the style of Las Vegas nightclubs, Sahara Suites come with a service host, and champagne is the most popular drink.

Other city hotels entice girlfriend groups by incorporating the city's attractions into their spa packages. For example, the Ritz-Carlton in Los Angeles has a \$1,800-per-night Stylecation package, which includes deluxe overnight accommodations, dinner for two at Wolfgang Puck's WP24 Restaurant & Lounge, a three-hour StyleChic personal shopping experience and the choice of \$100 spa credit or 60 minutes of personal training.

Similarly, the Girls Getaway Weekend Package (\$1,000 per night) at ZaSpa, the spa at Hotel Zaza in Dallas, is an accommodation package for two, which includes a Champagne Dreams Body Treatment, spray tan, manicure, and pedicure as well as private transportation to and from the nearby shopping areas.

And the Beauty and the Beach package at the Ritz-Carlton in Palm Beach, Fla., starts at \$450 each per night (double occupancy) and includes a \$200 spa credit for each night of your stay to use at the recently renovated \$30 million Eau Spa, which features hanging chairs and private suites with outdoor gardens.

"This trip allows us to do things that our husbands probably would not enjoy as much, and we refresh our friendships and ourselves," Wallace said of her Mii Amo stay.

ctc-travel@tribune.com

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