



You Go, Girl

FROM SPAS TO SHOPPING, WINERIES TO COOKING SCHOOLS, CHOOSE FROM THESE WEEKEND GETAWAYS FOR SOUTHERN GIRLFRIENDS.

BY DIANA LAMBDIN MEYER

I was one of those dreary days between Christmas and New Year's. The kids had been home from school one day too many and the excitement of holiday gifts had deteriorated into a constant bickering.

I was trying to ignore it from the sanctity of my home office when the telephone rang. It was my friend, Shelly, mother of three, whose husband was on an overnight hunting trip and whose dog had just regurgitated a box of holiday candy.

"Do you think anyone would miss us if we ran away from home, just for a day or two?" she cried desperately. "I need a girlfriend play date, now."

Women are realizing it's acceptable to leave family and obligations behind for a couple of days. And they are choosing to travel with other women, experiencing a sense of freedom and relaxation that is often only available in the comfort of good friends.

"Women are feeling more like they deserve a break from their daily routine, whatever that is, and they are taking charge of the emotional and physical needs by planning leisure activities with girlfriends that truly leave them recharged and invigorated," said Sue Wells, vice president of AAA Travel Services.

Weekend travel is more popular than ever, with half of all U.S. adults taking at least one weekend trip per year, according to the Travel Industry Association of America. Women make

the majority of decisions regarding travel for their families, so it is only natural that women take that research and turn it into a special weekend for themselves and their girlfriends.

Here are a few ideas for Southern girlfriend getaways that are close to home.

TURTLE COVE SPA

The whispering winds, calling birds and gentle sounds of nature that are the pre-recorded background hum at some fine spa experiences are the real thing at Turtle Cove Spa, a part of the Mountain Harbor Resort and Spa in Mount Ida, Ark.

Tucked away in the Ouachita National Forest about 23 miles west of Hot Springs on U.S. Highway 270, Mountain Harbor has been in the business of helping guests enjoy the region's natural beauty

Right: The New Orleans Cooking Experience offers novice chefs a chance to learn from the pros. New Orleans Cooking Experience photo

Top: Turtle Cove Spa in Mount Ida, Ark., offers guests relaxation and rejuvenation. Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism photo





since the family's patriarch, Hal Barnes, sold hamburgers from a fishing dock in 1954.

Debi Barnes is the heiress of the family business, a 450-acre family-owned resort that now includes a variety of luxurious condominiums and cottages, a full service marina, conference facilities, a restaurant with a view of the lake and an array of fun opportunities for rest or recreation. Hiking by day, stargazing by night, sailing, horseback riding or a simple visit to Suzanna's—an organic farmer's market at the resort—provide plenty of opportunities for friends to reconnect with themselves and each other.

But nothing tops a massage at the secluded outdoor pavilion overlooking Lake Ouachita, one of many professional services at Turtle Cove Spa.

The new "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" spa package includes a facial, 50-minute Swedish massage, pedicure, lunch and a souvenir gift for \$310 per person. The "Oh My Goddess" package (about \$700 through May 25) includes three nights of lodging in a two-bedroom, two-bath condo, with fireplace and hot tub, with extras such as a tiara, leather boa, bubble bath and chocolates. The popular "Girls' Night Out" includes two nights' accommodations and a half-day of spa pampering for \$462 (through May 25, based on four people).

NEW ORLEANS COOKING EXPERIENCE

Many women can't see cooking on a daily basis as fun. But spending the weekend with girlfriends tasting wine, creating traditional Creole recipes alongside New Orleans chefs and luxuriating



Above: Nestled next to Lake Ouachita in west-central Arkansas, Mountain Harbor Resort offers lakeview cottages and luxury condominiums, as well as a spa.

Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism photo

Left: Fredericksburg, Texas, offers quaint shops where you can buy crafts and collectibles.

Fredericksburg Convention and Visitors Bureau photo

in an 18th-century plantation that now is a lovely inn—that's a different story.

New Orleans had 10 registered cooking schools offering regularly scheduled classes prior to Hurricane Katrina. All pledge to return as soon as possible, and some have already resumed operations.

Judy Jurisich's New Orleans Cooking Experience and the inn from which she operates, The House on Bayou Road, are located north of the French Quarter at 2275 Bayou Road and sustained very little damage during Hurricane Katrina. She is open for business and accommodates up to 12 girlfriends at the inn's kitchen.

The weekend package includes a class on Friday night and a Saturday lunch class, followed by a Sunday brunch at Commander's



Left: Girlfriends enjoying a leisurely afternoon at the Fredericksburg Herb Farm in Fredericksburg, Texas, which features a day spa, restaurant, bed and breakfast, and herb gardens.

Fredericksburg Convention and Visitors Bureau photo

Below: Morgan Creek Vineyard at Harpersville, Ala., makes a variety of wines, ranging from a sweet apple to a dry red muscadine wine. Morgan Creek Vineyard photo

Palace. Free time can be spent reading or strolling in the lovely two-acre gardens at The House on Bayou Road. The price is \$450, plus the cost of accommodations.

From June 16 to Sept. 1, the Great Chef Series runs every Thursday evening. Chef Frank Brigtsen of Brigtsen's Restaurant teaches year-round.

Recently, Jurisich has begun to accommodate the requests of her guests to help in local recovery efforts. Her favorite activity is to connect guests with local garden clubs to restore and replant many of the beautiful public spaces in New Orleans. But if there's something else you want to do in New Orleans, she promises to do her best to make it happen.

A TOAST TO ALABAMA WINERIES

About halfway between Birmingham, Ala., and Atlanta, Ga., are three of Alabama's five wineries and a selection of activities befitting a tour of more opulent wine regions.

The Morgan Creek Vineyard (205-672-2053, www.morgancreekwinery.com) at Harpersville has a number of summer concerts under the stars, complete with winery tour, barbecue picnics and fireworks. For something a little different, the annual September Grape Stomp Festival offers prizes to the girlfriends dressed as Lucy and Ethel (of "I Love Lucy" fame) who dare to stomp a bucket of grapes. The winery is open Mondays-Saturdays.

The White Oak Vineyards (256-231-7998) near Anniston combines beautiful gardens of azalea and rhododendron with the lovely



winery tour. The gift shop sells as many potted plants as they do gift baskets filled with wine, jellies and candles. The Wine and Rhododendron Festival on April 21 and 22 is a wonderful event to share with friends. Tour the gardens, listen to bluegrass music and sip some wine. The winery is open Friday afternoons and Saturdays.

Twelve miles from Talladega, the Bryant Vineyards (256-268-2638) are located on the shores of beautiful Logan Martin Lake. Stroll the grounds and sip wine any time of year. However, in the early autumn months, guests are welcomed to pick their own muscadines. A beautiful gift shop and tasting room offer more treats. The winery is open Monday-Saturday.

HAVING IT ALL IN FREDERICKSBURG, TEXAS

If you have just one girlfriend getaway this year and want to enjoy all of the above activities in one place, consider Fredericksburg, Texas. Located in the Hill Country about 60 miles northwest of San Antonio, Fredericksburg was destined to be a girlfriend getaway. Built by very practical German immigrants, the community of 9,000 has dozens of fabulous bed-and-breakfast inns, great wineries, spas and more

than 150 festivals a year. Girlfriends can shop for quality handmade crafts and sample from a number of tasty cafés and restaurants.

A favorite is the Rather Sweet Bakery & Café where most tables are filled with girlfriends passing around heaping servings of Mexican Chocolate Fudge Cake or Praline Pecan Cheesecake. Owner Rebecca Rather shares her recipes in a cookbook called "The Pastry Queen."

Downtown Fredericksburg contains approximately 10 blocks of restored buildings linked together by covered boardwalks and sidewalks. The preponderance of fine craft and art galleries leads many to compare Fredericksburg to Santa Fe, but prices and customer service are more reflective of small-town hospitality.

Do yourself (and those you love) a favor: Schedule a girlfriend weekend getaway this year. ●

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BEFORE YOU GO

For more information, contact:

• Turtle Cove Spa, (870) 867-1220, 1-800-832-2276, www.turtlecovespa.com;

• New Orleans Cooking Experience, (504) 945-9104, or visit the Web site www.neworleanscookingexperience.com;

• Fredericksburg Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-888-997-3600, or click on www.fredericksburg-texas.com;

Learn more about Alabama wineries at www.muscadine.com/AWGAWineries.htm or www.alabamawines.org.

To schedule a girlfriends' weekend, first stop by your nearest AAA service office for maps, reservations, TripTiks and TourBook guides. A list of offices to serve you is on page 5 in this issue or visit www.aaa.com.

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