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Health & Medicine (A
Special Report):
Off the Treadmill: A stay
in a spa isn't going to
make you fit; But it can
help you get started

By Marilyn Chase

WOODSIDE, Calif. -- Behind a discreet stone gate, it's easy to miss the Lodge at Skylonda in its wooded niche of evergreens in the Santa Cruz Mountains, 33 miles south of San Francisco.

And that's part of the appeal for the guests who escape to this 16-room spa. Set on 16 acres of redwood and amber-barked madrone, Skylonda looks like an architectural fusion of California cabin and Japanese ryokan with log and beam ceilings and a Zen garden of raked sand in the lobby. The air smells of wood smoke and lavender.

The silence here is penetrating. There are no television sets or radios to drown out the wind in the trees. People speak in murmurs. Even the decor is quiet: moss, lichen and mushroom colors mirror the woodland palette right outside. The sunken tub in the bathroom is forest green. There's no electronic white noise; staying connected 24/7 is discouraged.

For those accustomed to an urban, deadline-driven life, this understatement is jarring. But for the sleep-deprived, caffeine-driven classes, a stay at Skylonda promises a welcome respite from the rat race: Pamper your skin with

facials; knead the knots out of a winter-weary body -- and soul. Obviously, spas can't make you fit. Yet for compulsive snackers or couch potatoes, a stay can help jump-start a fitness plan. Guests can go for a hike, take yoga or tai chi.

Of course, results vary. Most people don't stay long enough to achieve any significant physical changes. And some end up forgoing the hikes and mud baths for simple R&R.

And getting the kinks out doesn't come cheap. Day spas are the usual choice for busy people who want to indulge - - a quick afternoon getaway for a facial or massage. But if you want to really get away from it all, many spas like Skylonda offer overnight stays. Such spas can cost anywhere from about \$340 to upward of \$500 a night. Skylonda's rates, which vary by season, include room, meals and most fitness activity. Private fitness instruction and special treatments such as facials aren't included. A lodge room in the winter season is \$340 a night; that jumps to \$425 after April.

For Jeanne Smith of Oakland, a recent guest, Skylonda's isolation proves to be a shock at first. "I miss the little things like telephones and radios," she says. Then reality intrudes: Her office pages her. She requests that a telephone be installed in her room.

Dietary course-correction is one goal of Ms. Smith, 41. Assistant to the vice president of Southern California Edison, she and her husband eat out often in French restaurants. At home, there's foie gras in the fridge.

Here, there's an egg-white omelet, showered with fresh herbs for breakfast. "This will give me a kick-start," she says. "I do feel thinner. I've never eaten so healthily before. It's getting me more disciplined. Now, I want to take this back to my real life."

Ruddy-cheeked after a 10-mile hike, Jody Tull Tyler, a 44-year-old private-school headmistress from Ann Arbor, Mich., calls her stay "the ideal respite in the trees." A veteran of visits to spas from Baden Baden to the tropics, Ms. Tull Tyler says, "It's not about fitness; it's about rest.

"I have friends in Germany for whom spas are part of their culture," she adds. "In the U.S., life is frantic and we stay in high gear. But here, I love feeling my feet connected to the ground. It's restoring."

Feeling the pressures of my own deadline-driven life, I set out to test Skylonda's serene, rejuvenating qualities for myself -- and perhaps shed those few stubborn holiday pounds.

My initiation into spa culture begins with a personal-fitness evaluation, handled by Melissa Cadogan, an exercise physiologist with a degree from the University of Wisconsin. (There is no regimen, however. Guests can begin their stay with a swim, a massage or even some sleep.)

Fixing me with a gently appraising gaze, Melissa recommends augmenting regular aerobics classes with weight training and cycling at low intensity for longer periods -- 45 minutes instead of 30 minutes. This burns fat deposits, she explains. And the same principle applies to weight training: lift less weight but do more repetitions. And choose free weights over machines.

"It develops better, all-around supporting muscles," says Ms. Cadogan, "and it's more mindful." Mindful? Mindful is a key word here. Stretching is mindful. Yoga is mindful. Even free weights -- dumbbells -- are mindful.

At 5 p.m., an hour when many of my co-workers order a latte to fuel the late-afternoon labors, it's yoga time. Ms. Cadogan leads a class through postures like the cobra, pigeon, warrior, downward dog and cat rolls. It's hard to mirror her lithe poses.

"Receive the stretch," she intones. "After you do yoga, your body will cry out for it."

By 6 p.m., though, most bodies are crying out for hors d'oeuvres. A selection of appetizers is spread out in the great room. In the kitchen, sous-chef Denise Ball does a spa cooking demonstration. She offers a platter of crudites with pear balsamic dressing. Tiny gold and purple potatoes are halved and glazed with curry. Shrimp with black bean sauce nestle in wonton cradles. Who could feel deprived here?

"It's not strict spa cuisine," Ms. Ball explains. "But we try to limit fat and calories." When someone points to a plate of familiar-looking yellow sticks in the kitchen, she admits, "We do use a little butter for flavoring."

On tonight's menu: Cornish game hen in Calvados sauce, steamed asparagus and baby carrots (with skin, 560 calories and 19 grams of fat; without skin, 480 calories and 10 grams of fat). For vegetarians, there is an eggplant strata, with sun-dried tomatoes, pesto and red-pepper coulis (375 calories and 11 grams of fat). Dessert is a blueberry cobbler (250 calories, six grams of fat). A fruit bowl is offered around the clock.

While all this nutritional data might be too mindful for some -- Ms. Tull Tyler says the dietary disclosure "doesn't register" -- Ms. Smith, a dieter with a mission, says she appreciates the calorie and fat counts.

Spa days start early. On Thursday morning at 6:45, one instructor, Neil Johnson, is teaching a stretch class. A breakfast of fresh fruit and muffins is served at 7:30. At 8:15, a gong summons a dozen hikers for a choice of treks: short (4.5 mile) or long (10 mile) in the nearby Santa Cruz Mountains.

Our leader, Paul Ingraham, sets a brisk power-hike pace, his red ponytail bobbing ahead of us like a banner. We rock-hop across streams, and duck under canopies of redwood and pungent bay laurel. After 4.5 miles, Paul offers a basket of strawberries. The diehards go for 10.

Back at the spa, there's circuit training, using a stationary bicycle and weights, aquatic exercises or tai chi.

Tai chi is an ancient Chinese practice that resembles a martial-arts class in slo-mo. Neil explains that tai chi uses slow, sustained movements to cultivate energy and balance, and

provide a basis for self-defense.

He begins with two elementary movements. One is called "Making a Ball," where we cradle and roll an imaginary beach ball. Another move is called "Parting the Wild Horse's Mane," where we reach forward, to curry an imaginary steed. His students strain to capture the poetry of the pose. He says nothing dissipates energy faster than trying too hard to look cool.

After lunch, staffers recommend one of the spa's signature treatments -- the Salt Glow massage. Donning an ecru robe, I feel like a novice in some secret order of self-indulgence. My masseuse, Shasta Wallace, first steams and then exfoliates the skin with a rub of salt and aromatic oils. Next comes a shower, then a warm oil massage. She blends three techniques: Esalen, for deep muscle massage; Polarity, for the feet; and a Japanese technique called Jin Shin for the neck. The experience leaves you feeling liquefied.

At 5 p.m., there's another yoga class, this time taught by Mandala Cherney, who defies gravity by balancing on her buttocks with her feet and hands forming a letter "V" in the air. I crash onto my mat.

"Try for a controlled descent," she urges sweetly, then adds, "It's not about being competitive."

Right. This moment captures the spa paradox: Is this about self-improvement or self-acceptance? Whom to obey: Your inner striver or inner sloth?

Dinner interrupts this conundrum. Tonight it's grilled swordfish with couscous and snow peas in the dining room. It's 475 calories, with 11 fat grams, according to the menu. But after hiking, weight training, tai chi and yoga, visitors might decide they've earned the right to ignore the numbers.

Spas are big on affirmations. Each day, a printed activity schedule starts with one. Wednesday's affirmation: "I will not judge myself harshly." Thursday's affirmation: "I can be spacious [and] serene." Friday's affirmation: "I take the time I need to be whole."

After "Saturday Night Live" sketches like Stuart Smalley, spoofing self-help jargon, affirmations are easy to make fun of. I'd bet lots of high-achieving, hypercritical people who visit spas secretly soak in these soothing homilies like a balm, along with the aromatherapy oil.

But it's like believing a compliment from your mom: Nobody admits it.