

Winter Wellness

How to stimulate heart, mind, and soul when it's cold outside • by Nell Porter Brown

IN RECENT YEARS, University Marshal Jacqueline O'Neill and her daughter, Leigh, have spent part of the week between Christmas and New Year's Day at the Canyon Ranch resort in Lenox, Massachusetts. The tradition began when Leigh was in college. "It's not so much about the beauty treatments as it is about recovering from the rush of the holidays and carving out time to be with each other," O'Neill says. "This was our way to reconnect." She also considers this winter escape from daily life to be "a good investment in my health. We like to do a little bit of everything. The hikes are great. Pool aerobics are fun. But the 9 P.M. massages right before bed are the best. You only have to be there half a day and you're in another world. You really unplug."

Wintertime in New England can be hard on almost everyone. But just because it's cold outside doesn't mean that the region's citizens must hide under heavy clothes and coverlets, bemoaning the darkness at 5 P.M., until the crocuses bloom. "Spring is the time of creation and we see that all around us in the environment, as things begin to grow," says Keli Ballinger, director of the

University's Center for Wellness and Health Communication. "But I think we would serve ourselves well by developing that same sense of growth

during the wintertime as well."

This is especially true because opportunities for "winter wellness" abound. Throughout the region, there are spas, yoga retreats, sanctuaries, and lodges where one can soothe the soul, revive the flesh—and even stimulate the mind.

Canyon Ranch, which also offers specialized health and fitness programs, is among the best-known spa resorts in the area. Other top-rated organizations include the nearby Cranwell resort and golf club (partly owned by Daniel Burack, M.B.A. '57); the Topnotch Resort and Spa in Stowe, Vermont, which makes a point of offering spa services to men; The Spa at Norwich Inn (near the Connecticut coastline); and Wentworth by the Sea, which is located just outside of Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Wentworth happened to be the site of a recent three-day invitation-only symposium on global financial regulations held by the Program on International Financial Systems at Harvard Law School. After running around in three-inch heels and taking care of 122 people for 15 hours a day, administrator Katie Bosley says her feet were numb





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and her calf muscles tied in knots. So she got a massage at the hotel's spa. "I was just happy to be lying down," she says. Her colleague, Judith Polgar, who does not ordinarily go in for body treatments, got a deluxe manicure. "The buffing, the creaming, the massaging of the hands and lower arms, and the soaking of the hands in warm paraffin—it's all very relaxing," she allows. "I fell asleep."

FOR THOSE INTERESTED in more physical exertion, or gaining self-knowledge, the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health (also located in Lenox) offers regular, year-round "retreat and renewal" yoga programs along with dozens of more specialized mind/body awareness workshops and programs by guest instructors.

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For a rigorous meditation retreat, Gregory Sulkowski '00, M.D. '04, recommends the Vipassana Meditation Center in Shelburne, Massachusetts. He and his wife, Sunana Sohi '00, who live in Chicago, took time out of their medical residencies in 2005 to do a 10-day silent meditation practice. Men and women were separated. Books, music, phones, and writing materials were banned. And no eye contact—or even gesturing—with others was allowed. "It's not a spa; it's not your typical restful getaway," cautions Sulkowski. They awoke at 4 a.m. and spent their days in various physical postures concentrating on breathing and sensation, with few distracting external stimuli.

"The course itself is mentally grueling," he reports. "But all that said, almost two weeks of complete silence without e-mail, phones, or even anyone talking to you truly leaves you feeling peaceful and released." The retreat's effects have seeped into the couple's busy regular lives: they still practice yoga and meditate when they can—even

on the subway, or in bed before falling asleep. "I think Vipassana can be used as a general approach to managing one's reactions and mental outlook," Sulkowski says. "I consider it to be the single most important tool I have learned to help maintain my happiness and striving for greater wisdom."

If sitting still isn't alluring, there are plenty of places that cater to outdoor play and sports. The Craftsbury Outdoor Center in northern Vermont is a great vacation-lodge destination for individuals as well as families. In the warmer months, the center is best known for its sculling and running camps, although it also provides general activities such as lake swimming, hiking, and mountain biking. But in the winter, the center focuses on cross-country skiing for all ages and levels; serious athletes also train there.

Anna Schulz '09, a member of the Harvard cross-country Nordic team, grew up in Vermont and has gone to Craftsbury for more than a decade. "It's out in the woods on a little dirt road. It's beautiful—Vermont at its finest," she says. "It's geared more toward doing things outside and having a great vacation through being healthy and enjoying the outdoors, rather than having breakfast in bed in a hotel. But I must say that they do have wonderful food." Schulz and her family, all of whom ski, participate in races at the center, go snowshoeing, and skate and play hockey on the iced-over lake. "They have a really good ski-school program," she reports, "and they even host Elderhostel programs, so you're out there with everyone from the 80-year-olds to the kids who are just learning how to cross-country ski."

WINTER ACTIVITIES do not have to be expensive—or even very far afield. The Wellness Center, which is part of the University Health Services, offers its own treatments, classes, and workshops, from body therapies (such as massage, acupuncture, and reiki—hands-on healing) to yoga, t'ai chi, and Pilates. There is even a new "knitting for wellness" group.

Harvard graduate student Stephanie Aktipis, who studies the evolution of marine snails, took that four-session class last October just because she'd always

wanted to know how to knit. "The wellness part completely flew over my head until they started talking about it in class," she says. The teacher read excerpts from books on mindfulness and elicited thoughts and feelings from the group as they purled away. Aktipis is now making a cobalt-blue scarf for a friend, and often knits while watching television or before bedtime. "I haven't become one with my knitting," she says, with a laugh. "But knitting definitely helps me relax—when it's going well. I find that I really enjoy the chance to empty my mind of the day's craziness and focus only on the rhythm of the knitting.... There is something soothing about it."

The Wellness Center also offers a lending library of nonfiction videos and DVDs that feature classes on belly dancing and salsa dancing, among other activities. "Learning something new is another way to revitalize ourselves," says Ballinger. Commuters take note: Why not make use of all those hours in the car or on the train to learn a new language? she asks. (Schoenhof's Foreign Books in Harvard Square has a wealth of information and resources on language-learning, and companies like Pimsleur Direct offer com-

prehensive audio learning systems.)

Or why not absorb lectures on math, science, art, or philosophy? The Teaching Company, founded in 1990 by Thomas M. Rollins, J.D. '82, offers more than 200 recorded lectures by Ivy League and other university professors around the country, with notes and syllabi, to foster excellence in lifelong learning. The catalog is "a wish list come true for intelligent adults everywhere who wish they could study those things we cared passionately about as undergraduates, but that we couldn't pay attention to anymore after college because we had to go out and make a living," he says. "I was a passionate philosophy student and, trust me, once I got into law and started running a business, philosophy fell by the wayside."

Rollins himself is traveling to Italy next year and recently downloaded the "History of the Renaissance" into his iPod. "Italy will be a vastly richer experience because of that study," he says. "These lectures can be a marvelous complement to a life of exploration and adventure—and a joy for the life of the mind." ▢

Nell Porter Brown is the assistant editor of this magazine.

Winter Wellness Resources

Canyon Ranch Resort 800-742-9000, www.canyonranch.com

Craftsbury Outdoor Center 802-586-7767, www.craftsbury.com

Cranwell 413-637-1364, www.cranwell.com

Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health 866-200-5203, www.kripalu.org

The New England Wellness Web directory www.newellness.com

Pimsleur Direct www.pimsleurdirect.com

Schoenhof's Foreign Books 617-547-8855, www.schoenhofs.com

The Spa at Norwich Inn 800-275-4772, www.thespaatnorwichinn.com

The Teaching Company 800-832-2412, www.teach12.com

Topnotch Resort and Spa 800-451-8686, www.topnotchresort.com

University Health Services/Center for Wellness 617-495-9629, <http://huhs.harvard.edu/CWHC/WellnessPrograms/CWHCWellnessPrograms.htm>

Vipassana Meditation Center www.dhamma.org

Wentworth by the Sea 603-422-7322, www.wentworth.com