



Up and at 'em: Fitness Ridge guest Irina Stanescu, left, and Marianna Rivera reach the top of Tuacahn Canyon during a 7-mile hike near Snow Canyon National Park.

By Jud Burkett for USA TODAY

Low-cost spas will lighten the load, not your wallet

By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY

IVINS, Utah — The moon hangs low in the sky, barely illuminating red, raw Rorschach cliffs as a dozen or so hikers trudge up an asphalt road in what is known as the Stop Sign Hike. They may as well call it the Heartbreak Hike.

Almost 5 miles with an elevation gain of 1,000 feet amid the rugged splendor of Snow Canyon State Park, the trek is a first-day rite-of-passage for newbies at Fitness Ridge Resort and Spa.

"It took one guy two weeks of repeated trying to finally get to the top," says Richard Weintraub, 54, who's beginning the third of a four-week stay at the weight-loss facility.

The management calls the program "a compassionate boot camp," with a focus on no-nonsense principles and affordability. Feel-good spa treatments are available, but the emphasis is on physical activity. Lots of it.

In an era when some destination spas are lavishing glitz and gimmicks (six-handed massage and a gold-leaf facial, anyone?) on customers willing to pay up to \$1,000 a day for pampering, a few renegades, including Fitness Ridge, where all-inclusive rates are \$1,295 a week, are bucking the trend with a back-to-basics approach at relatively low prices.

Clearly, there's a demand. Affordable spa vacations is the most-searched category on Spafinder.com, a website that lists 4,000-plus facilities worldwide. Searches in that

category, which Spa Finder puts in the \$200-\$300 a night (including meals) range, have about doubled in the past year. And in a February survey of 340 U.S. travel agents, a quarter reported most of their spa bookings were in the \$200- to \$249-a-night range. (Conversely, only 11% said their most frequently requested bookings were for spas charging \$400 a night or more.)

One reason: As spas proliferate, competition spurs discounting, says Spa Finder president Susie Ellis. Moreover, consumers have become savvy.

"They don't speak in generalities anymore. They know the names of the treatments. They're asking much more sophisticated questions," Ellis says. "And people do think of spa-going as more therapeutic. It's not just about pampering. The thought is, 'If I'm spending \$230 for a day at the spa, I'm not just being pampered. I'm reducing stress and it's giving me something more.' "

At the family-run Tennessee Fitness Spa 100 miles southwest of Nashville, where a week-long stay in a room for four costs just \$750 per person, the owners have taken pains to keep rates low, says manager Rachel Manley.

"People come here for a lifestyle change or just to get away from the stresses of life. We try to keep it affordable for everyone," she says.

As its name implies, the key activity at New Life Hiking Spa in Killington, Vt., is trekking in the mountains. "People come from all over because of our affordability and the beauty of Vermont," says director Jimmy Lesage. "Why would anyone come this far to work out on a treadmill?"

Rates at the 5-year-old Fitness Ridge Spa drop the longer the stay, prompting some guests to check in for weeks and even months. From Day 1, there's buzz about 19-year-old David, an almost-legendary former guest who stayed for 24 weeks and shed 126 pounds. His before and after photos posted in the dining room draw admiring gazes from overweight newcomers.

Time to break bad habits

On her first day, Marie Meyer, 43, is hiking up the Snow Canyon road, manufacturers' tags dangling from spanking-new gear.

She plans to stay a month — long enough, she hopes, to break bad habits that involve the discovery of enchiladas with sour cream after moving to Santa Fe. The tab for a single room will run about \$5,700 vs. \$12,000 at a spa with more luxurious amenities.

Fellow new arrival Brigitte Debord, 49, wants to re-energize. She's been to pricier health resorts but sought out a budget locale because "when you're not spending a fortune, you can relax and think more about your fitness," the French teacher from Denver says.

Pat Krzeminski, 70, a retired real estate agent from Annapolis, Md., has checked in for six weeks in an effort to shed the 40 pounds she gained after her 44-year marriage ended. Weintraub, who runs homeless programs for the city of Boston, is seeking to fight his Parkinson's disease with fitness. At the end of four weeks, he'll depart 33 pounds

lighter. Sitting poolside waiting for the pre-dawn hikers to convene, he gazes at the red glow on the eastern horizon.

"I never miss the morning trip because that's the uniqueness of this place," he says. "The red rocks. The vistas. I have a smile on my face in the morning."

Fitness Ridge moved into new facilities in March, where unfinished landscaping has yet to soften the institutional vibe of its brown cinderblock design. But the 20 motel-style guest rooms are comfortable, the fitness equipment is state-of-the-art, the staff is professional and eager, and the 1,200 low-fat, high-fiber calories a day, while meager, are delicious.

Not surprisingly, food is a major topic at the communal dining table on the first night as introductions are made over rationed plates of vegetable lasagna (303 calories) and pumpkin cheesecake (163 calories). A hefty Catholic priest confesses he'd considered smuggling in a cache of In-N-Out Burgers. Theresa Sberna and her friend Marianna Rivera, both in their late 40s and battling the thickening effects of menopause, tell of snapping sentimental photos at a Krispy Kreme on the drive in from Las Vegas.

A guest has heard a rumor that at a swanky destination spa nearby, there's a full bar and warm cookies at lunch. All true, says Rory Gordon, 24, a Chicago salesman who has lost 12 pounds in his first two weeks here. He once spent two weeks at that facility without losing an ounce, thanks to buffet-style meals and unstructured time. "They'd end class early because Susie, Rachel and Sarah had to get their toes done," he says.

There's none of that at Fitness Ridge, where guests are strongly encouraged to participate in a highly scheduled day that begins with a two-hour morning hike, followed by breakfast (300 calories) and pool exercises, then lunch (400 calories), strength training, a cardio class, a stretching class, dinner (500 calories) and an evening lecture.

"One of the things people ask is, 'What's there to do at night?' Go to bed," says Krzeminski.

One evening, a nutritionist passes around rubber renditions of 80-calorie-size servings of pasta, berries and oatmeal in a lesson on portion control.

"Well *this* is a real eye-opener," says San Diegan Lori Lewis, 50. "No wonder I'm fat."

Let the detox begin

The facility has five massage rooms, two facial rooms and a salon, open evenings. "The feel-good stuff — wraps and massage and aromatherapy — are fine," says Michelle Kelsch, who with her husband, Cameron, owns Fitness Ridge. "But everyone is going around things and not doing the basics, which is exercise and nutrition."

The couple, both 28, radiate such good health, they almost shimmer. But they deliver a tough-love message that's bound to darken the mood of anyone hoping for a quick fix.

"We're everything but easy and fast," says Michelle Kelsch.

"You're going to be hungry," adds Cameron Kelsch. "That's what it takes to lose weight."

Indeed, by Day 3, the newcomers are in full-blown detox, having been denied their poison of choice. Their muscles ache. They're up before dawn with no stronger a pick-me-up than herbal tea. And they're taking comfort in this bond of discomfort.

"I woke up at 3 a.m. and couldn't walk to the bathroom," Debord says.

"I don't care if this banana *is* 100 calories. I'm eating it," Rivera mutters.

It takes the sentiments of a more seasoned guest, Krzeminski, now in her fifth week, to put the pain in perspective.

"There's a commonality here that's seductive," she says. "I feel cleansed inside and out. In fact, I'm afraid to go home."

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A 400-calorie lunch: Guests dine on broccoli soup, salad and whole-wheat and soy-cheese pizzas.