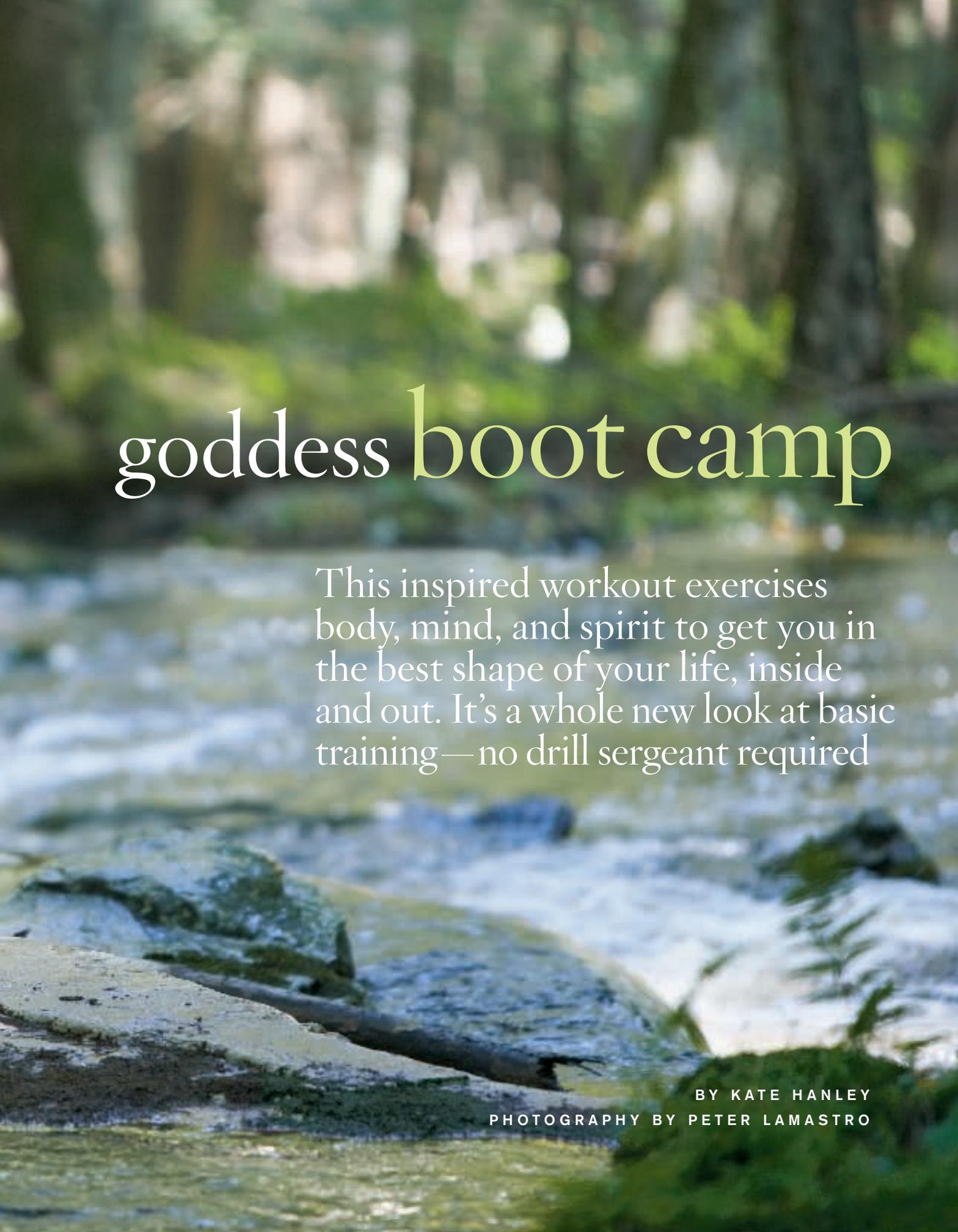




DIVINE INSPIRATION
For Sierra Bender, creator of the popular Boot Camp for Goddesses workshop, fitness has less to do with outer strength than with tapping into an inner power and sense of self.



goddess boot camp

This inspired workout exercises body, mind, and spirit to get you in the best shape of your life, inside and out. It's a whole new look at basic training—no drill sergeant required

BY KATE HANLEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER LAMASTRO

As I drove up the winding, wooded parkway toward the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, I wondered what a course called “Boot Camp for Goddesses” would entail, exactly. I got the boot camp idea. It meant I’d lunge, crunch, and sweat my way to a fitter physique. But the goddess part? I figured it would involve an *om* thrown in here or there to coax yoga types like me through dead lifts. But I was wrong—on both counts.

While my 50 fellow participants and I did our share of physically challenging activities—hiking, yoga, weight-bearing exercises, even some dancing—what surprised us was the unusual take on fitness. We learned that our conventional view of tip-top shape as ripped abs and bulging biceps was sorely shortsighted. “To become truly powerful, you have to be fit in more than just your physical body,” says Sierra Bender, who leads these popular Boot Camp workshops across the country and whose book, *Boot Camp for Goddesses*, comes out next year. “You need to know how to sit still and feel your emotions—and connect to something greater than yourself. Just because you go to the gym doesn’t mean you have any of these things.”

And that’s where the goddess part comes in. In addition to the physically driven activities, we spent our week engaged in ways designed, as Bender says, to awaken us to our female spirit. We sat together and talked or practiced being quiet with and present to each other; shook our hips in a belly dance lesson; spent as much time as possible in Mother Nature (whom Bender calls the ultimate goddess), taking solo walks in the woods; and finished off the week with a traditional sweat-lodge ceremony. One night, I even skinny-dipped under a full moon with my fellow boot campers. As I



floated belly-up in the inky water, I truly felt like a goddess: open, connected to a community of women, buoyed by nature, and utterly energized.

Bender highlights her four-pronged approach to health and fitness—spiritual, mental, emotional, physical—in the following workout for *Body+Soul*. A distillation of what she teaches at Boot Camp for Goddesses, it will help you unleash your own inner goddess by reclaiming your space, restoring balance to body and mind, and rejoicing in your feminine power. “So many women cut themselves off from their feminine essence,” she says. “They swallow their emotions and ignore the signals their bodies send them about the true state of their health.” By reawakening the power of your feminine energy, you’ll enact deep changes that can have a big impact on your life. “My students love doing these exercises because it gives them a greater sense of presence,” says Bender. “They feel powerful, and power is energizing. It goes way beyond the endorphin rush of a regular workout.”

Purify

WHAT IT DOES Prepares you for your day; releases stress. Native Americans traditionally burn sage, an herb believed to have purifying properties, to cleanse the atmosphere of negative or stagnant energy.

HOW TO DO IT Light some sage (found at health-food stores and online). Use your hand or a feather to waft the smoke over your head and body and around your space as you set an intention for your day.

reclaim

“We’re often afraid of our own power and don’t know how to claim our space in the world,” says Bender. These exercises help you get over that fear and gain clarity and confidence. “They’re a way of honoring yourself and your intention.”



Fire breath

WHAT IT DOES Reconnects you with your intuition; grounds you in your body; tunes you in to your inner wisdom; strengthens your abs.

HOW TO DO IT

Stand with your legs 3 feet apart, toes turned out, knees bent. Place palms on either side of your belly button, thumbs and index fingers forming a triangle around your navel. Inhale to a comfortable level, then begin a series of short, sharp exhalations through the nose, drawing your belly button in toward your spine as you exhale. You should feel your hands moving in and out. Do 3 rounds of 30.



Goddess pose

WHAT IT DOES Helps you fully inhabit your body and the space around you; prevents others from sapping your energy; balances vulnerability and strength; opens the abdomen and pelvis.

HOW TO DO IT

Start in the yoga pose called Tadasana, or Mountain pose, standing with feet hips-width apart and your hands in prayer position, palms touching. Inhale deeply, and as you exhale, step or jump your feet 3 feet apart with your knees bent. Bring your arms out to your sides, with elbows bent and palms facing forward. Hold for 5 slow breaths, then do 10 to 15 fire breaths. Bend your legs more deeply, keeping the spine erect and the knees in line with the ankles. Hold as long as you can, feeling the energy coursing through you, then release.



Goddess meets warrior

WHAT IT DOES Helps you strike a balance between the feeling, receptive goddess and the warrior who takes action; opens the hips; tones the belly; aids digestion; increases energy.

HOW TO DO IT

Stand in Tadasana (see instructions in Goddess pose, left), with your hands in prayer. Exhale and step to your right into Goddess pose. Inhale back to Tadasana. Repeat on the other side. Then, exhale and step the right foot forward into Warrior I pose, with the right knee bent to 90 degrees, the back leg straight, and the arms up toward the sky. Inhale back to Tadasana. Switch legs, and then repeat this cycle 5 times.

restore

Our nervous and endocrine systems can be thrown off by chronic stress. “The more you can keep your hormones stable,” says Bender, “the more you can control your mood.” These poses help restore balance for vibrant health and sustained energy.



Cobra pose

WHAT IT DOES Helps you to lead with your heart, not your head; stimulates ovaries by sending fresh blood to the womb; releases swallowed emotions. “Native cultures believe snakes are symbols of transmutation,” says Bender. “Cobra helps you turn vulnerabilities into strengths.”

HOW TO DO IT

Lie on your stomach with your hands palm-side down at or below your armpits, elbows tucked in by your sides. Press your pelvis down into the earth, engage the buttocks and quadriceps, and lengthen through your toes. Beginning with the crown of the head, roll up one vertebra at a time, lifting your neck, chest, and shoulders off the floor, while keeping your elbows bent. Drop the shoulders and feel your heart open. Hold for 30 seconds, then roll down slowly, keeping your spine long.



Downward Boat pose

WHAT IT DOES Stimulates your metabolism; builds core muscles. This pose (also known as Full Locust pose) helps you “practice keeping your heart open and letting the core of your body set your destination,” says Bender.

HOW TO DO IT

Lie on your belly with arms extended back, 6 inches away from your body. Press your pelvis into the earth, engage your back muscles, and lift your upper and lower body off the ground (as high as feels comfortable for you). Hold this position for 5 breaths, then slowly release back down.



Bow pose

WHAT IT DOES Restores clarity; helps you balance the push-pull between the ego and the heart; keeps you sharply focused on your goals; stimulates digestion; massages the kidneys and adrenals glands; flushes toxins from your system.

HOW TO DO IT

Lying on your stomach with your legs hips-width apart, bend your knees and hold the tops of your feet or ankles. On an inhale, press your feet into your hands, lengthen your spine, and rise up, squeezing your shoulder blades, opening your heart. Breathe through your nostrils and try to find a balance between ease and effort. Keep the spine long and evenly arched, rather than trying to lift up high. Hold this position for 30 seconds.

rejoice

“When we rejoice in ourselves, we release tension and pent-up emotions, and honor our own existence,” says Bender. One way to do this is to reconnect with nature, the source of all life. These exercises put you in closer touch with your creativity and ground your spirit.



Mother Earth pose

WHAT IT DOES Taps into your creative energy; strikes a healthy balance between giving and receiving.

HOW TO DO IT

With your feet wide apart, squat down with knees bent deeply. Bring your hands into prayer, pressing elbows against the insides of the knees to open up the pelvis. Take 5 deep belly breaths here, lifting up the pelvic floor while drawing the belly button in toward the spine.



Then, rise up into a standing position and open your arms wide in order to receive powerful, life-sustaining energy from the environment around you. Bring your hands into prayer above your head and draw this energy in with your hands down through your heart center. Now bring your arms down, keeping your hands in prayer but pointing fingers toward the ground to give back to Mother Earth. Finally, open your arms out to your sides to spread this energy to those who need it.



Make an offering

WHAT IT DOES Reconnects you with Mother Nature, “the most powerful goddess of all,” says Bender. Spending time in nature, she explains, heightens your senses, clears your thoughts, and grounds your energy, empowering you to achieve your dreams.

HOW TO DO IT

To perform this gesture of thanks, give an actual gift as a demonstration of gratitude. “I leave something at the base of a tree, like a crystal, a flower, or a piece of fruit. Then I say a prayer of thanks,” says Bender. Spend time in a place that makes you feel connected to the earth and leave an offering that carries a rich meaning for you.