

BOOT CAMP GODDESS-STYLE

WHAT IS IT?

A one-day workshop for women who want to take "time out" from their busy lives. Pioneered by Sierra Bender, an American yoga teacher, this boot camp promises to "empower you to reclaim, restore and rejoice in your worth and right to be" through an eclectic mix of yoga, breathing techniques, belly dancing and diet tips.

WHO'S IT FOR?

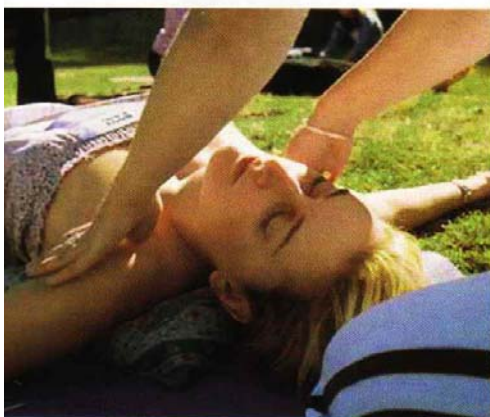
Women who want to learn new relaxation techniques or try yoga for the first time – or just take a day out from the rat-race for some healthy self-indulgence.

INTRODUCTION

0845 Being a goddess demands more preparation than I'd thought – or can manage. By the time I've gathered together the blanket, pillow, sarong, walking shoes, beach towel and pens required for my transformation from sloth to superwoman, I'm running late and feeling flustered. I'm also not quite sure what to expect, having always been too much of a wine-loving carnivore to embrace a truly healthy lifestyle.

When I arrive, it seems my worst fears are about to be confirmed: the other goddesses are sitting cross-legged in a circle while Mariam Massaro, a herbalist in bare feet ►

health wellbeing



and a kaftan, walks slowly around the group, waving a bundle of incense and mumbling quietly.

"For women, every day is about organising kids, partners, careers," says Sierra. "But women have not been created just to serve others. We are here to serve ourselves, and by doing that we can give to others."

The other goddesses nod in agreement, as do I. Next, we're split into two groups and asked to turn over tarot cards, each of which features a picture of a goddess, and talk about what that goddess (and the information we're given about her) might mean to our lives.

Everyone has a story, using their goddess to explain why they've chosen to come to boot camp. Some are feeling lost, exhausted and lacking direction; others have made a commitment to improve their health through eating well and practising yoga, and are eager to find out more. Everyone is supportive and, for the first time, I start to relax.

YOGA

1100 Previously, I've shunned yoga in favour of pounding away on a treadmill, so my muscles aren't ready for the discipline that's now required. Sierra takes us through a series of positions, encouraging us to hold them for as long as possible while using a number of different breaths (my favourite is the "fire breath", during which we breathe rapidly through our noses like angry pigs). After an hour, my posture has improved and I feel exhilarated. "You can achieve anything you set your mind to," Sierra says as she adjusts my position. Right now, I honestly feel as if I can.

DEBRIEF

1300 As we're munching through a lunch of organic nori rolls, lentil cakes and salad sandwiches, a chiropractor takes us through some of the principles of alternative health care and sensible eating. It's helpful, but she's preaching to the converted: I doubt that any of these women routinely snacks on chips and

chocolate bars. The rest of the afternoon is devoted to belly dancing and craft work. Wide smiles and flushed faces abound, and each woman here looks every inch a goddess.

THE PAIN

The most strenuous activity is yoga, although enthusiastic belly dancing leaves me breathless. Listening to other women's stories, and being encouraged to share your own, can be emotionally tiring, so I'd advise any potential goddesses to get plenty of rest beforehand.

THE GAIN

Before coming here, I was worried that I'd killed off my inner goddess a long time ago, but once I let go of my prejudices, the day turns out to be really enjoyable. Not only do I pick up some useful tips on nutrition, but the introduction to yoga inspires me to sign up for some classes. Everyone seems more relaxed and energised by the end of the session.

THE VERDICT

This boot camp offers a mental rather than physical workout, within a safe and supportive environment. As a one-day break from the daily grind, it's great. ■

Boot Camp for Goddesses took place at Sydney's Watson's Bay and cost \$135 for an eight-hour session. Nurture Works is organising two longer workshops for goddesses in March next year, at Nowra and Byron Bay, NSW. For more information, visit their website at www.nurtureworks.com, email them at info@nurtureworks.com, or call (02) 9388 7383.

BOOT CAMP FOR THE BRAIN

It isn't just your body that benefits from exercise – new research has found a workout that's great for the brain too

When psychiatrist Dr Gary Small devised a two-week "brain boot camp", his recruits progressed quickly. Scans taken of their brains showed that after just two weeks, cell activity on the left side of the brain had increased – meaning that their memory had improved. What's more, the boot campers' blood pressure fell and they lost an average of 1.14 kilograms.

There are four elements to Small's program: daily exercise, "memory aerobics", techniques to reduce stress, and a memory-boosting diet. Fruit, vegetables and oily fish have long been thought to improve memory function, but Small, director of the Center on Aging at the University of California, Los Angeles, also advocates switching from red meat to lean white meat or fish, which contain healthier, brain-friendly proteins.

"The key," he says, "is to eat small meals five times a day to keep your blood-sugar levels even, to ensure a constant fuel supply to the brain so concentration powers are maintained."

Cutting down on stress reduces the production of adrenaline, which can inhibit brain function. Playing games like chess and doing crosswords also keep your brain active – and healthy.

BUILDING UP YOUR BRAIN

- Cut out fatty foods
- Eat small meals five times a day
- Reduce stress – try breathing techniques and exercise
- Eat brain-boosting fruit and vegies like strawberries and broccoli
- Do crosswords and word games, and play chess – puzzles like these give your brain a workout