

Girls

A good laugh among good friends is a great tonic

by Sandra Phinney

just wanna have fun

Sue Hutchins



Belle Hatfield

A misty morning at Birchdale Lake retreat. Top, from left: a group of women relax on the porch of one of Birchdale's original cabins; a paddler enjoys the still waters on a women's paddling weekend in Southwest NS; women at a yoga retreat take part in a "laughing meditation." Opposite: a group of kayakers gather in a pod to take a break from paddling on St. Mary's Bay, NS.

A few years ago, I went on a three-day kayaking trip on St. Mary's Bay in Nova Scotia, led by Hantford Lewis, owner of Hinterland Adventures and Gear. The fact that I was 60-plus and had never been in a kayak before was a bit daunting, but Hantford assured me no one had ever drowned on his watch.

After assigning kayaks and helping us load them, Hantford gave us a 15-minute lesson on land. We mimicked paddling strokes, got in and out of the boats a few times and learned how to attach a skirt to the kayak. Then we headed to the gear station for lifejackets.

By the time we returned to the boats, my anxiety level was out of sight, but I positioned my paddle—just so, and carefully got into the kayak—just so. Then I focused on getting the skirt secured without tipping over. As I reached for the paddle, I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Sandra, you may get farther if you put your boat in the water," Hantford said.

I was high and dry.

I've since learned a thing or two about kayaking. But aside from that blunder, the most memorable part of the journey was spending time with my childhood friend, Donna Lee Cain, who had also signed up for the trip. We laughed

ourselves silly on more than one occasion. We also tested our endurance and felt pretty pleased with ourselves at the end of each day.

That trip was so special that I called Hantford a few months later and asked if he would lead a five-day excursion the following summer. We worked out a price for 10 women.

On that trip, what seemed at times to be endless paddling—dipping and raising the paddle—produced a Zen-like state that was both sensual and satisfying. Gwen Davies had been one of the first to sign up. I recently asked her what stood out about that journey and she said, "Swimming in the Bay of Fundy." She added, "It's wonderful to go on a trip where everyone can participate yet take time for themselves, sing around a campfire and have someone else look after the meals. Having things to do, but not having to do everything—that was lovely."

Ronnie Cousins concurs. She's been part of a women's getaway since she and her daughter went canoeing with a group of women more than 15 years ago. "You need an out-of-the-way place and activities that are new or different. Our group's size expands and contracts, but it's usually around 20, ranging in age from mid-30s to mid-60s. The



Sandra Pinney
Sue Hutchins



only rule is: what goes on (during the weekend) stays on the weekend."

Their women-only ventures have ranged from whitewater rafting on the Penobscot and Kennebec rivers in Maine, to horseback riding at Broadleaf Guest Ranch on the New Brunswick side of the Bay of Fundy, plus spiffy spa getaways.

In 2009, the feisty 60-something rented two houseboats from Lakeway Houseboat Vacations on the St. John River in New Brunswick. Everyone was so impressed with the multiple staterooms, the fireplace, barbecue, and hot tub on the upper deck and the water slide (not to mention the shenanigans that went on) that they returned last year in September. This, after also spending time during the summer in Montague, PEI, where they signed up for a water ceillidh (fiddling and dancing aboard a fishing boat) followed later by a break-the-bank shopping spree in Charlottetown.

This summer, Ronnie has planned a tidal bore rafting trip on the Shubenacadie River in Nova Scotia. They'll likely stay near Tatamagouche, and are planning side trips to Jost Vineyards and Seagull Pewter.



Sandra Pinney

As for yours truly, I will be joined, for the fourth consecutive year, by 20 women at Birchdale Lake in September. It's an old hunting lodge and former monastery in southwest Nova Scotia. We go there ostensibly to paddle, but it's really all about eating—and letting our hair down. We do those two things very well.

So call your daughter, mother or best friend and plan a getaway. It matters not if there are two or 20 of you, what you do, or where you go—just that you boot it out of town.

As Ronnie says, "There isn't a day goes by that you don't see an article on healthy living and lifestyle choices. We're told to eat this, don't eat that, exercise and get some fresh air. There's a far simpler prescription. Get a few girls together, then get away and let 'er rip in a totally uninhibited environment. There's nothing like it!" 🍷