

The Washington Post

D4 MONDAY, JUNE 8, 1998

Style Plus

Focus

The Getaway

All-Women's Gatherings

By MELANIE CHOUKAS-BRADLEY
Special to The Washington Post

"Gone fishing" used to mean the guys had disappeared for some R & R, but today women are just as apt to gather up one or more friends and take off for a rejuvenating respite. Whether they are backpacking in the wilderness or unwinding at a spa, women of all ages are finding that a short break from everyday life in the company of other women can be just the thing. Mothers briefly freed from the responsibility of young children find themselves able to speak in whole sentences. Women juggling careers and family download their frustrations. The outcome often is an unexpected discovery of new perspectives and insights.

All-women's gatherings of recent decades have reflected shifting female roles. From the coffee klatches of the '50s, the consciousness-raising groups of the '60s and '70s, and the power lunches and play groups of the '80s and '90s, a new trend is emerging, one that goes beyond but seems to blend a pinch of each: gathering together to get away from it all.

Dalis Davidson is an artist and sheep farmer living in western Montgomery County with an outdoor-oriented husband and three active sons. She has seen a good part of the world framed by tent flaps. For the past 10 years, Davidson has organized annual women's backpacking trips to mountain locales within a half-day's drive of Washington. The women friends who have accompanied her (in groups of four to 10) have ranged from novices to experienced trekkers.

"The thing I like best, besides laughing and being in a beautiful place, is that when we get to the campsite everybody just *does* [whatever needs to be done]. There are no kids around needing prodding. Everyone falls into it naturally—setting up the tent, lighting the fire, pumping water, etc. No one needs to be asked."

Terrie Daniels, who owns an area health club, has accompanied Davidson on many trips, beginning when her son (now grown) was 13. She says backpacking is "a way to connect with other women, nature and yourself. You can't get it from shopping or going to lunch. On a long hike, with 35 pounds on your back, you get into a rhythm, a 'bonding zone' with those you're with. I come back inspired, with fresh perspectives on my life."

Participants in all-women's getaways, strenuous or not, describe the ease with which women can switch from the silly to the sublime. Davidson and Daniels remember a 10-woman giggling fit several years ago, sparked by a group attempt to hoist an overstuffed food bag—heavy on chocolate—into a tree to protect it from bears. They dubbed the bag the "bear piñata" when it refused to budge above a certain height.

The friends chuckle when they remember how they nearly provided a feast for Dolly Sods bruins. They also recall how the piñata incident was followed by Daniels leading an impromptu tai chi class under a full moon. Davidson says she often asks participants to bring poetry and reflective pieces to read around the fire. But she confides that she has purchased dime-store tiaras for the next hiking trip.

Another type of getaway is gaining popularity among women family members. Recently, Cris Fleming, a local botanist, drove to Cape Cod where she met up with her adult daughter Molly (a mother of two). Fleming and her daughter then traveled to the Berkshires for a short respite at a yoga retreat. Alone together "for the first time since Molly's 1984 wedding, we could talk," says Fleming. "We talked about ourselves instead of being centered on the kids. We discovered how similar we are."

For several years Terrie Daniels has accompanied her



PHOTOS BY MELANIE CHOUKAS-BRADLEY

Dalis Davidson, left, Bev Thoms and Terrie Daniels, right, preparing for a backpacking trip this spring.

widowed mother, great-aunt and grandmother on an annual getaway to Kentucky where they "played cards, sang and laughed a lot." When her grandmother died last month at the age of 93, Daniels says she was comforted by memories of the Kentucky trips. "We call ourselves 'the girls,'" she says, recalling the way chronological age seemed to evaporate.

When women travel together it often falls to their husbands or partners to hold down the fort at home. For Davidson's husband, Houston Miller, a chemistry professor at a local university, that meant taking care of newborn lambs while his wife was away with women friends recently, and bringing their young son to one of his lectures. But Miller seems to bristle at the suggestion that this was a hardship.

"Sure it's tougher to run a household when one parent is gone," he says, "but both of us are quite capable of

functioning, together or apart."

Davidson agrees, adding, "He spoiled the lambs."

The women's getaway trend has spawned a mini-industry specializing in adventure travel. Susan Eckert of Rainbow Adventures in Bozeman, Mont., has been in the business of offering adventures to "women over 30" for 16 years. This year she has organized a Tanzania safari, a Patagonia rafting trip and horseback riding in Iceland. Eckert says some women bring along a mother, sister, mother-in-law or friend.

Down the road in Big Sky, Mont., Betsey French is teaching women the art of fly fishing and leading women's fishing trips through Gallatin Riverguides, which she co-owns with her husband, Steve. According to French, there are 18 million women anglers in the United States as well as a growing network of women's fly fishing clubs. French is on the steering committee organizing the 3rd annual International Festival of Women Fly Fishers to be held in Idaho this fall. When asked what women get out of fishing together, French replies, "confidence and camaraderie ... If they don't catch a fish, it's not a big deal."

Here at home, "Artists on the Road: Travel as Source of Inspiration," a recent exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, featured artwork inspired by women's travels from the 17th century to the present.

Susan Abbott, a contemporary American artist featured in the exhibition, wrote in her sketchbook during a solo European trip: "Why am I here rather than working and with my family? Because—there is a time for everything: A time to work flat out (and I have and will again); a time to take care of the people I love, and a time to take care of whatever makes me myself (what makes me/myself?); a time to look inside of my box (my home, my box in the world) and a time to have no box, only great open space ... to experience the precarious state of grace achieved by walking through the landscape of my imagination."

There also is a time to come home (for everyone but Thelma and Louise), where the rejuvenation of journeying is followed by the abruptness of reentry. Bev Thoms, a Montgomery County mother of four, returned from a recent women's trip to Scotland to find a banner draped across her door. It read: "Welcome Home, Mom! What's for Dinner?"



Bev Thoms on a spring backtracking trip.