

# ESSENCE

## Sister Sojourns

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BY ALTHEA LENORE HONEGAN

Last October my 22-year-old nephew, Everton, was suddenly and violently taken from me. He was drawn into a street brawl that, for him, proved lethal. Everything within and around me fell apart. The faith that once held me together came unglued. I was overwhelmed by fear.

In need of solace I turned to my sister circle, a group of women friends who began meeting monthly four years ago. It consists of my girls Dana Cobbs, 31; Ilov Grate, Suzanne Halsey and Valerie Hopkins, all 30; Sadeqa Johnson, 26; and Monique Moody, 32, who had just had a baby. Although our regular slumber party was a month away, we decided that a respite from the city would do us all good.

Our destination was Coolfont Resort in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, near the Pennsylvania and Maryland borders, which regularly hosts a Wild Woman Weekend. For \$ 70 each, we rented a Ford Expedition (which we nicknamed The Dragon). Six of us drove down from New York City on a Friday; Dana, who'd just started a new job, took a bus from the city and joined us on Saturday.

My editor-in-chief had recommended the resort for its serene environment but warned it would be very rustic. *Okay, I thought, we can do rustic, but no television, cable, VCR or DVD, no cell-phone reception and barely any radio signal?* Suddenly "rustic" didn't sound so hot. We did have a wood-burning stove in the comfy living room, but what finally put us at ease were the Jacuzzis in all four bathrooms.

We dropped our bags and headed to the orientation. With glasses of chilled Chardonnay in hand, we listened to a diverse group of women, ages 16 to mid-fifties, talk about why they'd come: Wives wanted time away from husbands and children, the overworked and underpaid were on long-overdue vacations, a mother and daughter came to bond. It dawned on me that the Wild Woman Weekend was about being wild enough to be free, taking time out from the routine to get in touch with ourselves and with others.

We split up after dinner, and Sadeqa and I checked out the Nia class. (*Nia* is Swahili for "purpose.") We joined about 30 other women seated in a circle in a large dance studio. The theme was Finding Your Creative Passion. The instructor, a middle-aged White woman, divided us into three groups -- writers, dancers and artists. (We went with the writers.) Our leader played a song and asked us to respond to it with our group's form of expression. As soon as the music began, a poem to my nephew flowed, releasing pent-up emotions. When I finished, I looked up to find the dance group bouncing around in the center of the room. As uncoordinated as they appeared, it was wonderful to see them dance with such freedom. They were channeling their passion, and somehow the dance was beautiful, in sync.

On Saturday Suzanne and Valerie set off early for the 30-mile drive to Hagerstown, Maryland, to pick up Dana. After an eight-hour bus ride, Dana wasn't feeling sisterly or relaxed, so we directed her to a Jacuzzi and soon she was good to go. Then Sadeqa and I had full-body massages. Since Everton's death, I hadn't slept well. But as soon as the masseuse laid hands on me, I drifted off.

In the afternoon our circle came together for a drumming and dance session. The teacher asked Dana to beat the big *djembe* drum. I'm not sure if Dana was releasing bottled-up energy from her bus ride or if she was possessed by the spirit of our ancestors, but she straddled that djembe and, to our amazement, beat it as if she'd taken lessons for years. During the last number my sisters formed a ring around Dana and beat in time with her. For a moment it felt like the embodiment of friendship -- different sounds combining to a powerful beat.

That evening after dinner, we fired up the wood-burning stove, lit candles, broke open a bottle of wine and held our circle discussion. We talked about the meaning of our group, saying we should love and honor one another and cherish each moment together, and we gave thanks for our fourth anniversary. At some point I looked at baby Kaya, the new life Monique had brought into the world, and remembered my nephew's abruptly ended life. I began to cry, and Monique and Ilov encouraged me to scream, be angry and hurt. It would make room for the good that was sure to come, they assured me.

Sunday morning, as we headed home, I slipped deep into my thoughts. I knew my healing wouldn't come easily, certainly not after one weekend retreat I also realized that loved ones would come and go, but that memories of experiences shared with my girls, and of my last dance with my nephew Everton -- our shoes off as we swayed, full of life, to calypso in the rain -- would last forever.

Althea Lenore Honegan is the Living Well assistant editor at ESSENCE.

## **The European Plan: A Sister Circle Travels to the French Riviera**

BY PATRICE GAINES

When my girlfriend Earni suggested putting together a group of women to rent a house in the south of France, I thought about bathrooms. I grew up with six siblings in a house with one full bath. Need I say more?

To avoid this insanity, we pooled our money to find a house with plenty of beds and bathrooms and a few extra luxuries none of us could have afforded alone. With six months to plan, we put together a group of nine like-minded, flexible sisters ranging in age from 34 to 63. We didn't have room for divas. One spoiled sister can sour a sojourn.

Earni was referred to two United States -- based services with catalogs and Web sites featuring rentals (interhome.com and athomeinfrance.com) but also searched the Internet on her own, typing in "Provence" and finding other properties. This second approach led her to a villa, called Mas St. Christophe, that was perched on a hill with manicured gardens, a panoramic view of distant blue mountains, a heated outdoor

pool, a fireplace, a washer, five bedrooms and a den that doubled as another bedroom -- ten beds and five baths in all.

We spent \$ 700 apiece for the two-week rental (about \$ 50 a night), spreading three payments over six months. Earni handled bookkeeping. She even rented two cars online, which we ended up paying for with the refundable deposit from the house. We flew from different cities -- Tucson, Arizona, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia -- and met at the villa. A mere \$ 90 extra from each person bought groceries that fed us for the entire stay.

No matter how we spent the day, we always met back at the villa at seven for dinner. We had wonderful meals, better than what we could have afforded in restaurants: chicken cooked on an outdoor grill, lamb roast and scampi seasoned with fresh herbs from the garden.

We covered a lot of territory: the legendary beaches of Nice, the palace at Monaco, trendy boutiques in Cannes, waterside cafes and art galleries in St. Tropez, the house where James Baldwin once lived in St. Paul de Vence. And only to say we visited Italy, we drove across the border for dinner. But some of our best times were spent in the villa together, sipping wine and chatting around the pool, reading books beside the fireplace after dinner and holding hands around a candlelit table, thanking God we had the good sense to appreciate sisterhood.

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#### STARTING A CIRCLE

A circle is a group -- in this case, sisters -- that gathers regularly to exchange feelings about work, life and relationships or to simply kick back and have some fun together. Here are tips on starting a circle of your own:

- \* Try to meet monthly.
- \* Designate a treasurer to collect dues for expenses: food, travel and other special activities.
- \* Begin and close each circle with affirmations (prayers, quotes) that everyone is comfortable with.
- \* Choose monthly themes: spa, recipes, tea, love, intimacy, sex.
- \* Form committees -- to plan for a vacation, an annual outing -- and rotate officers.

#### RENTING OVERSEAS

- \* Properties listed by stateside agencies average \$ 500 to \$ 1,000 more a week, but there are advantages: Contracts are in English (we had ours translated), it's easier to check the agency's reputation, and phone costs are cheaper.
- \* Larger companies take credit-card deposits; smaller agencies often require money transfers from your bank to theirs. The fees for our two transfers (deposit and balance) cost about \$ 50 each.

\* Be aware of extra costs: utilities (minimal), phone (use phone cards), maid service (we declined) and linen (it's much cheaper to bring your own, even if you have to pay extra for heavier luggage).

\* Ask about the source of water. In some countries, well water may not be palatable. You may have to get it delivered.

\* Expect definitions to be stretched. Our villa listed a stereo system with CD player -- what we got was a boom box.

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