

climb every mountain

a Utah spa offers transcendent hiking
through a starkly gorgeous landscape

by Marjorie Ingall

THE FIRST THING YOU NOTICE about Red Mountain Spa is that all the plants look like something out of Dr. Seuss. There's creosote, a bush covered in tiny, symmetrical fuzzy white balls. There's electric-purple prickly-pear cactus. There's sacred datura, a drooping, lily-like nightshade used as a hallucinogen in Native American religious ceremonies. There are squawbushes dripping with bright red, frizzy berries. There's Mormon tea, a spiky bush that looks like David Bowie's hair during the *Space Oddity* era. One tree in front of the reception area (which no one, not even the spa's master herbalist, could identify) is loaded with yellow flowers, out of which sprout comically surreal pink antennae. Red Mountain doesn't go in for that genteel English-rose-garden look so common in the world of spas.

This place sits at the gateway to Snow Canyon State Park, a sandstone's throw from the Grand Circle of national parks: Zion, Bryce Canyon, and the Grand Canyon. You're surrounded by breathtaking red rock cliffs and forbidding troughs of black petrified lava. Perhaps befitting the stark setting, Red Mountain is a bit less coddling than many spas. No one monitors your weight, food intake, or heart rate. You're treated like an autonomous grownup here, not like a pampered princess at calorie-deprivation Disneyland. And perhaps as a result, Red Mountain seems to attract more "normal" people than any other spa I've visited. Sure, there's a group of hardcore endurance hikers who sit together in the cafeteria like the cool kids in seventh grade, but most of the guests are very fit without being fitness-obsessed. And a sizable minority choose not to

exercise at all, but spend their time lounging in the hammocks around the property, basking in nature.

magic rocks

A typical Red Mountain day starts with an early-morning hike in some of the most spectacular scenery you'll ever experience. We trekked across cliffs with sweeping 360-degree views and mystical sandstone formations, and through canyons dotted with pinion pines, junipers, and fragrant sage. Lizards, jackrabbits, and hummingbirds darted around us. We saw the names of Mormon pioneers etched high up on cliffs like 19th-century graffiti, and cryptic, beautiful prehistoric Anasazi rock art. At the end of every hike, deliciously icy washcloths treated with a hint of peppermint oil awaited us in the van. I soon found hiking buddies: a nurse from Ohio who'd recently quit smoking and lost 60 pounds, a Berkeley yoga devotee who ran an education foundation, and an agreeably klutzy federal government employee (in four days she fell off a mountain bike, toppled out of tree pose into a wall, skinned her knee while collecting sage, and nearly drowned during an aquacize class... but she kept smiling).

Hiking's certainly the centerpiece of Red Mountain's fitness program. But there's plenty to do if you have an aversion to Coolmax socks. There are at least two yoga classes a day, one active and one restorative (both teachers I had were terrific). There's also a fascinating assortment of other classes, stressing flexibility and mind-body connection as well as cardio and strength training. There are four

kinds of Pilates classes, hot yoga, qi gong, and a pool class called Aqua Asana. My favorites were Neuromuscular Integrative Action (NIA), a movement class that incorporates elements of yoga, modern dance, and martial arts; Yoga on the Ball, which involves a large Fit Ball; and Chi Ball, which draws from tai chi, Pilates, yoga, and Feldenkrais. Chi Balls are smallish rubber balls that come in orange, yellow, green, and purple, with corresponding fragrances (orange, lemongrass, geranium, and lavender). They all speak to different chakras and address imbalances in chi. I'm not sure of the science of this, but I felt clearheaded and happy by the end of class.

For me the most challenging exercise occurred on my second day. It involved trying not to look at Chris Noth (*Sex and the City's* Mr. Big) on the yoga mat next to me. I admit I lost my inward gaze enough to note that he has really great legs.

Of course, a spa is not a spa without a few treatments. I loved my Fire and Ice facial, which used apple and grape pulp for exfoliation (trendy fruit acids, in their organic form), followed by a paprika scrub to stimulate circulation (ow) and an application of whipped, chilled organic masques and moisturizers (ah). I also had a pedicure during which my legs were rubbed with a mixture of honey and red adobe clay with essential oils, but Chris Noth was in the pedicure chair next to me, so honestly, the technician might as well have been rubbing me with cougar dung.

Mr. Big was far from the only guy in attendance. Red Mountain had the highest percentage of men of any spa I've been to. (Deborah Evans, the spa's general manager, says the ratio of women to ►

Swirled, petrified
sand dunes in nearby
Secret Canyon.



COURTESY: RED MOUNTAIN SPA

breathe *130*



men is around 65-35.) Manly activities like GPS Adventure help. Participants are given global positioning systems, taught to read latitude and longitude coordinates, then sent to hike, forge streams, scramble up rocks, and jump ravines to find hidden caches—usually old weatherproof ammunition boxes—filled with trinkets and log books. Also helping to maintain the gender balance are offerings such as kayaking, rock-climbing, and golf.

rugged luxury

Red Mountain's standard rooms do the trick, but I highly recommend splurging on a villa. I loved the chic, minimalist aesthetic and my wide private porch overlooking the cliffs and lava flows. Villas have dark slate floors, Italian rattan beds with clean structural

lines, and organic cotton bedding. The huge windows are covered with sliding canvas panels you can arrange to frame different views of the landscape. The walls are adorned with op art-y, graphic aboriginal yarn paintings and big Indonesian red-feather head-dresses. Every room has its own river-rock fireplace. Every bathroom has a rough-hewn wooden ladder leaning against the wall to hold your towels, a pebbled shower floor to give your feet a massage as you wash your hair under the rain-disk showerhead, granite countertops, and a Jacuzzi tub. Bliss.

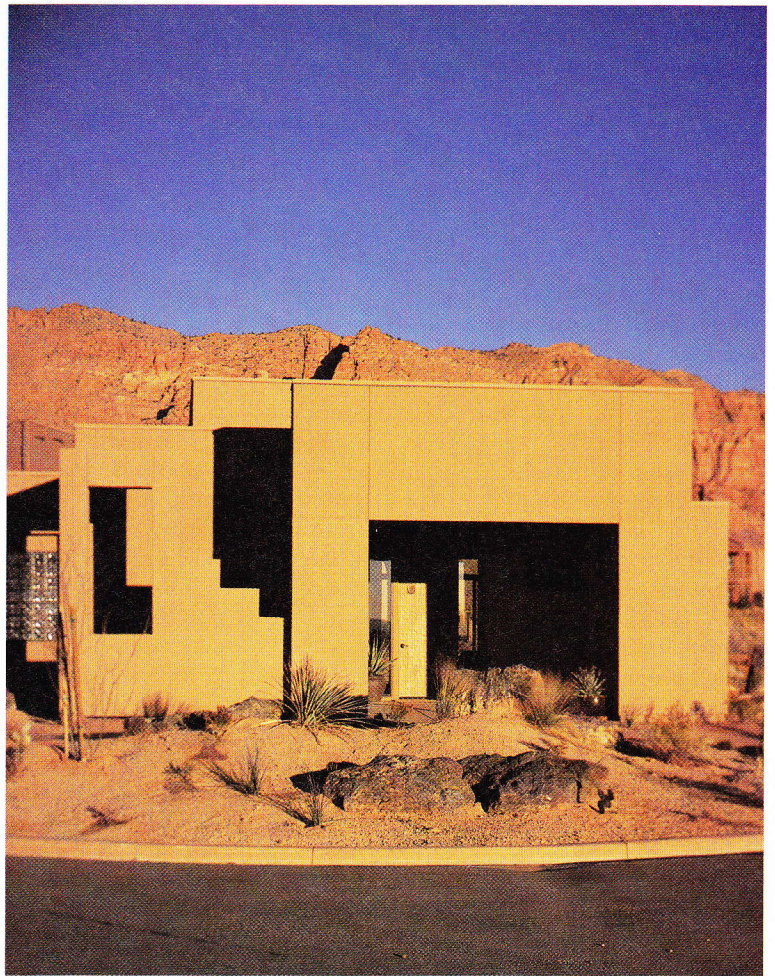
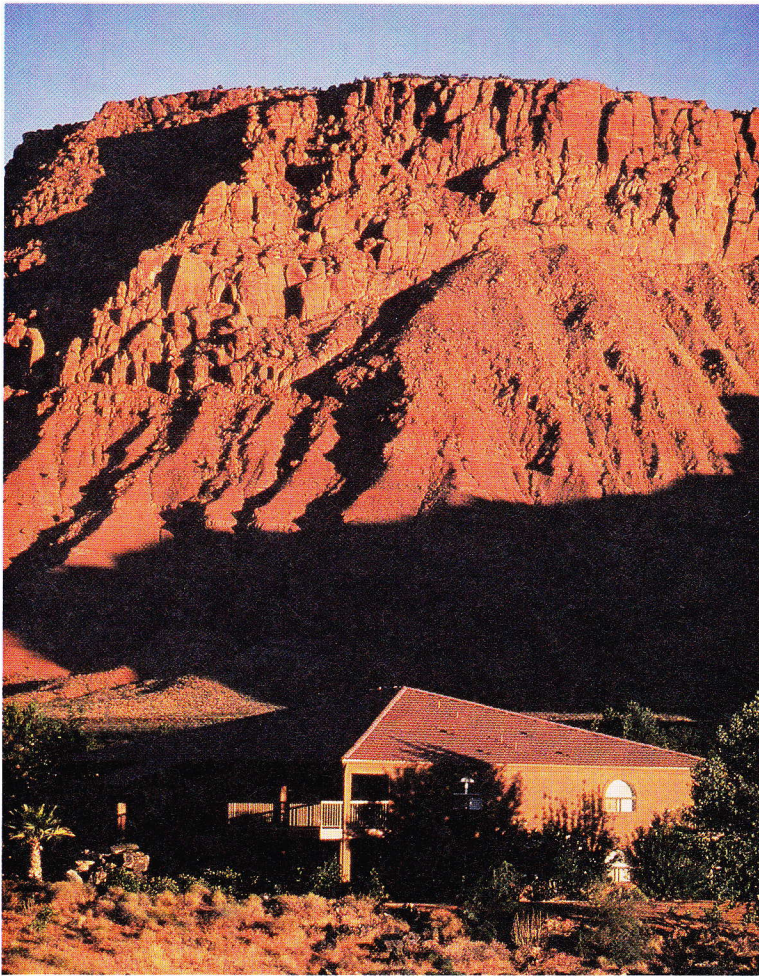
I respected Red Mountain's attitude toward food. This is not *cuisine minceur*. The menu is healthful and creative (try the fettucine with pumpkin-seed pesto, or herb tea-poached salmon with peach salsa), and about half the ingredients are organic. But you can eat as much or as little as you

like. A salad bar, soups, and fresh fruit are available at every meal, as is good organic coffee.

giving back

My favorite activity turned out to be the Herbal Nature Walk. One evening after dinner, a medicinal herbalist took four of us out into an old, dry riverbed a few miles from the spa, where we learned about the healing properties of all that surrounded us. After a sage-smudging ceremony, we learned to gather plants in a sacred, responsible way. We all got small bags of blessed Hopi blue cornmeal to make our own offerings to nature. Then we collected herbs to make bundles, which we learned to tie ourselves. By the time we got back to the spa, the sky was electric with stars. ○○○○

"We trekked across cliffs with sweeping 360-degree views and mystical sandstone formations"



Opposite: Guests gather in the early evening for a stone-circle fire ceremony. Clockwise from top left: Late-afternoon sun illuminates a guestroom complex and the red rocks of Snow Canyon State Park. The entrance to one of the spa's luxury suites. Each is 1,750 square feet and comes equipped with a fireplace and private outdoor space. Left: Inside a luxury suite.

Red Mountain Spa, Saint George, Utah

Contact: 800-407-3002 or www.redmountainspa.com

Capacity: 174 guests

Rates: Standard rooms start at \$275 per night; villas range from \$435 to \$535, depending on size and season. Check the spa's website for special offers.