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Adventurous spirits

Finding yourself can be a long, rugged journey

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Ask most people their idea of therapy, and the response will likely include a couch, a sympathetic ear and an hourly rate. It probably won't involve mountain climbing in the Dominican Republic or a midnight hike in the Canadian Rockies. That's what makes Erin Leider-Pariser different from most people.

Every season, Leider-Pariser, 45, of Greenwich, takes a group of eight to 10 women to some exotic locale where



Contributed photos

On the top of the world: Susan Finkelstein, left, of Greenwich, Erin Leider-Pariser, and Nancy DeFik, of Greeley, Colo., in the Canadian Rockies. Leider-Pariser's Greenwich business, Sports Travel Adventure Therapy, takes women on rigorous, outdoor journeys for self-discovery and female bonding. Left, client Monica New, of Aspen, Colo., takes a break during a recent STAT bike trip in the Dominican Republic.



they talk, bond, get in touch with themselves — and engage in some wildly insane athletic activity. It's called Sports Travel Adventure Therapy, and Leider-Pariser said her trips fulfill every aspect of that title.

"It's all about getting out in nature," she said. "For controlling people who have to have total control over their lives, it's very freeing."

Leider-Pariser was a fitness instructor in New York in the 80's, and went on to become an exercise physiologist. She began doing adventure trips with her clients because they liked the exotic physical activity aspect of it. Then clients started asking if they could bring friends with them, and the business grew.

In 1995, she moved to Greenwich with

her husband and her two sons, now 14 and 17, and decided to do the adventure trips as a full-time job. Today, she runs four STAT trips a year, one for each season.

The trips are unique in that all the participants are women, Leider-Pariser said, which can make them an ideal opportunity for self-discovery, and forming friendships. "It's a very bonding experience," she said.

Recent trips include this month's voyage to the Canadian Rockies where the group stayed in a mountain lodge in the region's Selkirk Mountains. Other journeys this year included a February trip to the Dominican Republic, where the group hiked up the 10,419 foot-tall Pico Duarte Mountain.

Voyages often combine such activities



Adventure Lady: Erin Leider-Praiser, owner of Sports Travel Adventure Therapy in Greenwich, takes a moment to reflect in Patagonia, Chile, at sunset last fall.

as hiking, biking and rafting with more relaxing pastimes such as yoga and massage.

Leider-Praiser said her clients range in age from early 30's to mid 50s and include both fitness fiends and those in moderately good shape.

But, she said, "You have to be physically active to do this. You don't have to be a triathlete, but you have to be in pretty good physical condition."

You also have to be somewhat well-heeled, as trips start at \$2,500 (not including airfare).

Frequently STAT'er Susan Finkelstein, 41, of Greenwich, is well aware how crazy it seems to spend that much money to trek through the wilderness, when you could easily have a lovely time at a spa for roughly the same price. But, she said, it's worth it.

"You kind of laugh at yourself that you're paying to do this," said Finkelstein, who has been going on trips for the past four years.

"But it's a journey. You're going to be proud of yourself when you're done. Sure, you can go and get a facial or a massage, but what have you accomplished?"

Though she's never been a "grrl's girl," Finkelstein, a stay-at-home mother of three who has known Leider-Praiser for years, turned to the trips to help

decompress. This year alone, she went on both the Canadian and Dominican Republic trips.

"It's a way to get out and get away from civilized life," said Finkelstein, whose children are 14, 12, and 6. "You tap into life in a way that you've never tapped into it before."

There is also a spiritual aspect to each trip, such as a ceremony Leider-Praiser conducts in which all of the women contribute something that represents a problem or issue that they're working on.

For instance, she said, one woman was having trouble adjusting to her son growing up and growing apart from her, so she brought something of his.

The participants tie the item to a "talking stick" [often a stick that Leider-Praiser has found during one of their excursions], and discuss what is bothering them. The ceremony allows the women to open up about their problems, and let go of them. "These trips are all about this," she said.

Nancy Friedlander, 39, of Weston, has gone on five trips, with the Dominican Republic jaunt being the most recent. The stay-at-home mother of two met Leider-Praiser through a mutual friend several years ago, and was impressed with both her energy and her physical prowess.

"Erin is in incredible shape,"

Friedlander said. "She is like one big muscle. And she has this spark that just lights up a room. You're just drawn to her."

But, Friedlander said, what's most remarkable is that Leider-Praiser makes all the women who go on the STAT trips with her feel special.

"Erin challenges each one of us to do something we wouldn't normally do in life," she said. "She doesn't even make you feel bad if you can't do it. She makes you feel happy that you tried."

The trips have even helped Friedlander inspire her two daughters, aged 13 and 11, to be more athletic. "I have used Erin's methods to get my daughters to do new things, and it's worked."

The next STAT trip – to Santa Fe, N.M. – will take place in the fall. It will include a hike through the desert and a visit to a traditional adobe sweat lodge.

Leider-Praiser said that, like all her trips, this one will be demanding, but rewarding. However, she points out, "all of the trips are different."

"Some are more rigorous than others. Some are more luxurious than others. It's not for everybody."

For details on Leider-Praiser and Sports Travel Adventure Therapy, visit her Web site at www.stattrip.com.

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