



The LakeHouse Spa includes a cafe, pool and both indoor and outdoor treatment areas.

AN OUTDOORS-LOVING GUY AND A GAL WHO LIKES TO BE PAMPERED FIND AN IDEAL COMPROMISE IN A GETAWAY TO THE LAKE AUSTIN SPA RESORT.

Couple's Retreat

BY STEPHANIE ALLMON

This is the perfect vacation for us," I said to my sweetie as we stretched into hammocks along the shore of the lake and watched a fishing boat ebb by as slowly as the ducks beside it. "Pampering for me; nature for you."

We were halfway into our three-day stay at the Lake Austin Spa Resort, and, still wearing fluffy white robes and flip-flops after our facials, we were pausing a few moments to decide what to do next. Would it be a class on women's health

for me? A paddle on a kayak for him? Perhaps an early dinner followed by a swim in the indoor pool?

The allure of more quiet time pulled us into the light-filled Garden Library, where we passed the next indulgent hour curled up with books.

Ask the myriad fans of the Lake Austin Spa Resort, and they'll tell you this feeling of laid-back luxury is what pulls them back time and again. Tucked into 19 meticulously maintained acres on Lake Austin across from a protected nature preserve and with accommodations for just 80 guests, the resort feels



The spa sits across the lake from a protected nature preserve.



Hammocks on the banks of Lake Austin allow for a time of quiet reflection.

intimate and exclusive. But with several friendly cats meandering about the grounds, an invitation for guests to cut their own herbs from the garden and a congenial staff of folks who mostly live in the neighborhood, a stay here also feels as unpretentious as a few days at your best friend's lake house.

The resort has a history as quirky as Austin itself. It opened in the 1940s as a fishing camp, and in the '70s, became a nudist camp. It then had stints as a rodeo camp used to lodge clowns and cowboys, a "reducing" (weight-loss) resort and, finally, it became the Lake Austin Spa Resort in 1994.

Since 1997, owners Michael McAdams (a Dallas resident) and William Rucks have continued to remodel, upgrade and update the resort to turn it into one of the top destination spas in the world. The 25,000-square-foot LakeHouse Spa opened in 2004, and a multimillion-dollar renovation of the guest rooms was completed in 2008. Recently, the kitchen was remodeled,

and renovations are planned for the main dining room.

Lake Austin Spa Resort recently became the only destination spa in the world to be named to the Platinum Circle on Conde Nast Traveler's Gold List for 2013, meaning it's earned the highest possible marks from the annual magazine readers' survey for the past five years.

But back to how it was a perfect vacation for my boyfriend, Mike — a nature-loving, outdoorsy type who likes to "rough it" — and me, who, well, appreciates all those things in him, but from the comfort of indoors, with glass of wine in my well-manicured hand.

When I'd told him I'd booked us a stay at the Lake Austin Spa, he'd furrowed his brow and asked, "What am I gonna do there?" Visions of women of a certain age lunching on ares massage salads and sipping fizzy cocktails, no doubt, were playing through his head.

But at the first glimpse of the sparkling lake, lush gardens, tall old trees

and charming cabinlike accommodations, he started to believe my way of "camping" wouldn't be so bad.

Upon arriving, we ate our first lunch in the lakeside dining room (I, the lamb patty in pita, and he, the carne asada on torta), changed into our robes and sandals, and followed the path up the hill to the gorgeous LakeHouse Spa for our first treatments. The spa is open to daytime guests, too, but access to the grounds is limited.

We relaxed in the grand upstairs Blue room, reading magazines and sipping the water of the day — cucumber — before being led to our treatment areas. There are more than 20 rooms, indoors and out, where guests can receive any of the 100-plus treatments on the menu.

For the next 100 minutes, I was scrubbed and massaged in a signature body treatment called Gifts of Our Garden (\$325), which used organic rosemary and mint picked from the garden in the salt scrub and massage oil.

Mike, meanwhile, not only enjoyed a 50-minute Java Pedicure (\$80) — one of three men's treatments on the menu — but afterward, took advantage of having the sauna and whirlpool of the men's area all to himself. To my astonishment, my manly man declared he'd like to go back to the sauna the following day and would like to get his first facial. ("This is going better than I ever could have imagined!" I thought.)

For a healthy dose of nature later, we explored the grounds' massive organic Healing Garden. It's practically a small farm of more than 1,000 species of seasonal fruits, vegetables, herbs and flowers used in the kitchen, in the spa treatments and for the enjoyment of guests.

The spa's director of flora and fauna of 28 years, Trisha Shirey, told us she and executive chef Stephane Beaucamp discuss regularly what to grow. ("He tells me what he wants, and I tell him what I can grow," she said.)

During our stay in mid-February, rows and rows of kale plants found their



Some areas allow for two or more people to receive treatments together.

The indoor Pool Barn, where guests can swim or take aqua exercise classes.





way into a delicious Garden Kale Caesar Salad, which I ordered with dinner all three nights.

In another place in the garden, "Lily," one of five well-tended cats who takes up residence on the grounds, cuddled up to us and meowed a request.

"She wants you to give her catnip," a gardener told us and then snipped her a few springs from the catnip plant. Another of these friendly felines, "Ben," followed us back to our cabin and made himself at home until we politely coaxed him back outside.

We understood the appeal of the room to him, though, as the house-keeping staff had turned down the bed, flipped the clock radio to the classical music station, fashioned hand towels into cruise ship-style towel animals and filled a champagne bucket with ice.

Each of the 40 guest rooms features Kohler stepping/soaking tubs, Egyptian cotton sheets and down comforters on the beds, custom-designed furniture, and signature lavender bath and body products. Some have lake views. Ours had a gas fireplace and a private backyard garden with a Jacuzzi.

While it was tempting to order a bottle of bubbly from the extensive room service menu (Dom Pérignon is \$294; Veuve Cliquot is \$86), I popped open the bottle of prosecco and Mike cracked open the local beers we had purchased from the liquor store down the road. (Outside alcohol is permitted in guest rooms.)

We toasted to relaxation before examining the night sky from the Jacuzzi.

The next day began with a two-



The expansive organic garden grows plants, vegetables, herbs and flowers used in the kitchen and in spa treatments.

The upstairs Lake Room, where many of the wellness classes take place.

hour guided river-view hike through the woods, hills and valleys of the neighboring master-planned community of Steiner Ranch in northwest Austin. It was, of course, an activity Mike looked forward to and one I was a little less enthusiastic about, as the ground was muddy from a recent rain and I'd heard there were coyotes. (For the record, we

didn't see any.)

The delightful tour guides, two women who lived in Steiner Ranch, paced our group of six so that we got a workout, albeit not an overly sweaty, strenuous one.

A well-earned lunch afterward at the Aster Cafe — a pretty blue room inside the Lake-House Spa with stained glass in the windows — included a scrumptious wheatberry chili, harvest salad and chicken-sausage flatbread. The house-made frozen yogurt — on this day, blackberry cheesecake flavor — quickly became a favorite dessert to take outside and enjoy on a deck overlooking the water.

Among the roughly 20 activities offered each day are various seminars and demonstrations covering topics from artificial sweeteners to ayurvedic medicine. Our visit hit during a focused week called The Culinary Experience, so each day brought a new cooking class in the



Several indoor spaces, such as the Garden Library, provide a quiet place to read.



Chef Stéphane Beaucamp leads a cooking demonstration.

demonstration kitchen.

In *Cooking with Quinoa*, Beaucamp prepared the trendy seed three ways: in a bacon fritter, in a sweet potato-pancetta soup and in a salad with roasted beets, chickpeas, baby spinach and orange vinaigrette. We and the other eight students happily ate lunch-size portions and interacted with the charismatic chef, who was born and raised in France and once cooked for Nicole Kidman's birthday party. I tried to make the soup a week later at home, and sadly, it wasn't nearly as tasty as it was at the spa.

At another class, an aromatherapy workshop led by garden guru Shirey, we had our eyes (and sinuses) opened to the many practical uses

for essential oils. (Tips: Dab lavender oil on burns and fire ant bites; mix one cup baking soda and 20 drops essential oil for a carpet deodorizer; add 25 drops essential oils to 1 tablespoon vodka and 2 ounces water for an air freshener.) She even mixed up a minty "wellness" potion that came in handy later when spring allergies made us stuffy.

As often happens at destination spa visits, the most stress — really, the only stress — comes from seeing lots of activities on the schedule but not being able to fit them all in around spa appointments and downtime. We kept "meaning" to work out on our own in the gym. We never did, although we did take



In the LakeHouse Spa's Blue Room, clients can relax before their treatments.



The outdoor Palm Pool and whirlpool areas, up the hill from the main resort.

a group cycle class that was as fun as it was challenging. (Partly so, because with just 27 guests staying at the resort when we visited, we developed a summer camp-like camaraderie with a few of them, including a couple from Burleson who kept practically the same schedule we did.)

Mike was dying to get some time on the water in the way of a stand-up paddleboard, kayak or hydrobike. The closest we came was a guided boat tour up and down several miles of Lake Austin. This allowed for some spectacular backyard "voyeurism" as the boat glided by computer tycoon Michael Dell's lake house (complete with a regulation football field), past a \$9 million mansion where actress Natalie Portman had just finished filming a movie and past spectacular homes high on the hills, connected to the boat docks below by ski resort-style cable cars.

On our last visit to the LakeHouse Spa, I tried one of the newest treatments called a Natural Face Lift (\$175), a 50-minute high-tech facial that incorporates plant stem cell serum and ultrasonic and microcurrent technologies to keep skin young and fresh. I loved it so much that I purchased several of the products in the gift shop before leaving. (They give you a discount card, so it's entirely too tempting.)

"I really feel thoroughly pampered," Mike said when he emerged, fresh and glowing, from his 50-minute Men's Fitness Facial (\$155).

On our last afternoon, the most gloriously warm day we'd felt in a while, we put on our swimsuits and soaked up the sun by the outdoor Palm pool until it was time to pack for the drive home to Fort Worth.

Our sense of spa-induced calm and well-being lasted just as long as it took us to hit a traffic jam on Interstate 35, somewhere right around Temple.

Now, nearly three months later, I keep asking Mike when he wants to book another "perfect getaway" to the Lake Austin Spa.

But he's got another idea he thinks will be more perfect: He wants us to go hiking and camping in the mountains.

To which I keep furrowing my brow and asking, "What am I gonna do there?"

Lake Austin Spa Resort

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Austin

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www.lakeaustin.com

Three-night resort package rates start at \$1,720 per person, based on double occupancy including all meals, fitness classes and activities. Spa services are à la carte. Seasonal specials and longer stays are available.



In the Living Room, clients can relax indoors next to the water.