

Good Vibrations

COUPLES UNLOCK ENERGY, EROTIC ENLIGHTENMENT AT MASSAGE WORKSHOP RETREAT

About seven feet to my right, my boyfriend is oiling down a naked stranger. This is odd, I think.

Okay, okay, to be fair. He's not a total stranger. We only met him about 14 hours ago, but you get acquainted with folks fast when you're spending a weekend at a group massage retreat at Frog Meadow, a clothing-optional men's resort in a quaint, gay-friendly corner of picturesque southern Vermont.

And besides, I'm doing the same—practicing on my own randomly chosen partner a series of muscle-melting techniques, energy-channeling movements, and other intriguingly mystic-sounding approaches to “Heart-Centered Touch” under the guidance of Adam Brown, a New York-based instructor and acupuncturist. Brown taps Taoist principles for his fraternal-feeling workshops that explore male touch through energy-unlocking elements of massage. It's all about exhaling, with a whiff of enlightened eroticism.

Over the course of a three-day weekend, me, my love and 10 other guys will share meals, hot tub-time and personal stories—from the hilarious and lighthearted, to the pretty profound. We'll arrive feeling ready to disconnect from the frenetic pace of the world outside these woods—and a little anxious about what the hell this woo-woo-sounding workshop will actually entail. (Some of the men have done these before. Others, like us, have never joined an organized nude getaway with a group of, almost-entirely, gay men.)

We will leave, however, feeling more relaxed and rejuvenated than we have in years.

That's exactly the point, says Scott Heller, who owns and operates Frog Meadow with his husband, massage therapist Dave King. Heller says the Vermont resort draws guests who “seek deeper connections with humanity,” and “have the desire to share and learn in a relaxed, spiritual and nurturing environment.”

Yet it still has the trappings of a charming bed and breakfast. Frog Meadow serves up its crunchy workshops with pro chef-prepared meals and Egyptian-cotton sheets. “The mind can only absorb what the body can endure,” says Heller. No monastic asceticism here.

And there's proved to be a big market for what Frog Meadow offers. It has earned a growing national presence as a New England



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getaway for gay men, and a Frog Meadow escape was even featured as a contestant prize on the eighth season of “RuPaul's Drag Race.”

Frog Meadow started hosting retreats shortly after its 2007 opening, and Brown—the first guest instructor to appear, has held about 30 at the property since then. (He returns in October.) But he's hardly the only one. Frog Meadow has become the unofficial stateside spot to find Germany-based, globetrotting “GAY-TANTRA” expert Armin Heining, tapped New York author and life coach Ray Rigoglioso for “Celebrating Gay Manhood” workshops, and welcomed popular New Jersey instructor Colby Smith for “Yoga & Wellness” weekends, among other programs.

The property, a popular pick for visitors to nearby Rock River, a clothing-optional nude

beach with a storied gay history, appeals to a certain kind of traveler: the type who love the outdoors, appreciate an air of spiritualized sensuality, and won't get red-faced if they encounter a peep-show while doing their Green Mountain State leaf-peeping. (Though to be clear, there's an inclusive emphasis on the second part of “clothing optional” here. We'd previously stayed very comfortably at Frog Meadow without ever disrobing.)

The “Heart-Centered Touch” retreat, among the most popular, is rooted in Brown's early-'90s work using the “healing arts” as a response to the height of the AIDS epidemic. At a time when gay men were being treated like pariahs, bodywork was a way to cultivate compassion—and help folks restore some kind of emotional equilibrium—through the simple yet radical process of skin-on-skin contact.

“We developed a community among ourselves,” recalls Brown, who would visit hospitals simply to touch sufferers being ostracized even by staff. “It was really profound.”

Many of the guys who joined our late-spring session had their own impactful experiences: I met a bisexual man from Rhode Island who explained how being “vulnerable around other men” was helpful in healing as a survivor of sexual assault; a guest from New York who felt so emotionally isolated from other gay men that he had never been able to accept tender touch; and a couple from Connecticut who discovered that workshops like this helped them “reignite” their communication and connection with each other.

At the end of one day of workshops, me and my boyfriend meandered back to our bed in the “Bee Cottage,” an adorable, seasonal setup in the middle of a meadow. (It has solar-powered electricity. The bathroom, however, is the nearest tree.) We were spent in a wonderful way, full from dinner, and ready to spend time together, feeling peaceful and present. Will this sensation last when we return to the stress of work-life in Boston?

Maybe so, maybe not. But if nothing else, I realize, a Frog Meadow workshop will leave you with remembrances of unforgettable fun, recharged batteries and new bodywork pointers to practice. On who? That part's up to you. [X]

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