

# Divine Solitude

BY MARY HUGHES



“Release the stress in your shoulder, raise your right arm over your head and let it float above you.”

These words are gently spoken by yoga expert Helen Goldstein as I lie on a mat under a shade tree on the lawn of Ste. Anne's Spa in Grafton, Ontario. This is my first yoga experience. I had always doubted friends who told me how much I would enjoy yoga since I'm sure I suffer from ADHD. But the truth is – I'm loving it! For a gal who normally can't sit still, I now understand what they're getting at. These gentle exercises have made me feel better, less stressed, and even a little tired. These reactions are not unusual, Helen notes, especially for beginners who are letting go of stress and concentrating on the movements.

I have made my trip to Ste. Anne's alone and am surprised to discover that my yoga classmates had also arrived solo. We have all come to this retreat 90 minutes east of Toronto for a little break from our hectic lives and the chance to yoga our stresses away. We met for dinner our first night and quickly became friends. Frances has come to the retreat because she will be having surgery and wants to focus on her well-being. Susan is moving from her home of many years and needs some time away from the chaos. Kat also needs some time for herself as a break from the demands of a busy life and family. "Travelling to spas on your own is a truly comfortable experience here," says David Navia, Director of Marketing and Public Relations at Ste. Anne's. "Many of our guests travel solo and think nothing of it – it's the new norm."



The four-day retreat included two yoga classes daily. On our first day, we enjoyed a meditative walk with yoga. We began with ten minutes of easy yet effective stretches, using the garden tables and chairs as props. We had a lovely visualization activity that focused on using all our senses – feeling the breeze on our skin, hearing the birds chirp, smelling the flowers. We watched our breath and noticed our thoughts as we began the walk. The focus was on the mechanics of our movements. As we walked slowly, we shifted awareness, fascinated to lift our feet off the ground as we made each step. We counted the steps we made in each inhalation and exhalation then slowed our breath down. Between these walking meditations, we used the trees as props (some of us even hugged a tree or two), did some great standing stretches and continued our yoga poses. Helen asked us to be mindful

of our breath, our thoughts and our balance. "Monkey minds" faded away and our breathing slowed down. Our stress levels subsided and made room for feelings of tranquility and renewal.

I stayed in the magnificent 1,200 square foot Maud Watt suite. Located on the third floor of the spa, it is exquisitely furnished by the Hudson's Bay Company and offers cathedral ceilings, French doors and gorgeous views of Lake Ontario from its balcony. I felt like I was in a turret bedroom of a French chateau. The meals at Ste. Anne's spa are equally heavenly. Executive Chef Christopher Ennew C.C.C. features fabulous fare and 25% of the menu is from the Specific Carbohydrate Diet™ that is low on calories, high on taste and recommended by some people with intestinal disorders.

Ste. Anne's is one of the first destination spas in Canada. It has truly set itself apart from the others. Wellness is paramount here. Rules include no television or telephone in the rooms. The staff really wants guests to unwind when they visit. In addition to an array of spa services, educational and interest classes, positive energy fills the air. It's the people at Ste. Anne's that radiate this warmth. I felt relaxed, as if I was visiting with old friends – ones that I look forward to seeing again. I will come back – without company and without hesitation!

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Ste. Anne's is the only spa in Canada with its own onsite chaplain. Father Ed Caccia jeopardized his role as a Roman Catholic priest for supporting women's ordination in the Church and is now known as Reverend Ed. He is the spa's first unofficial non-denominational pastor-chaplain and the newest addition to their caring team.

"There is a lot of room for spirituality at the spa," says Ed. "Many people who come to us are hurting – in the mind, body or soul. I shuttle people in with their luggage and help them unload. In talking with them, I discover that some guests are grieving, at crossroads in their life, burned out in their relationships or jobs, or sick with cancer or other difficult illnesses. Dressed in casual pants and a shirt, they may not realize how I can help them until they see my nametag that reads 'Reverend Ed'. Then they understand that they can turn to me to ease their pain."

The former high school teacher from Malta and later Peterborough police force chaplain had first felt unsure if he would be able to fit into the spa. But Reverend Ed soon realized that Ste. Anne's was above all a place for healing. "Our emphasis here is on the whole person, one who cannot be divided into parts," he notes. "If one part is suffering, the whole being is affected. I try to help each of our guests on site as they come to me with their concerns and give them something lasting to take with them to put into practice."

After 21 years in the priesthood, Ed Caccia has found a new calling where he continues to shepherd those who are in need.