



WOMEN AT PLAY

When 121 Curves members from Philadelphia set sail for Bermuda, no one could have predicted the result.



These women know how to play! Above: Barbara Frazier (left) and her sister-in-law Phyllis hang out on deck. Above right: Ginger Miller (left) and Irene Segletes unwind with a game of shuffleboard. Above center: Jennifer Bower (left) and Sally Donahue in the ship's splash pool, and (right) snorkeling off an island in Bermuda.



Opposite page: A classic house in St. George, plus Angie Miller (left) and Debbie Sernicola in the stocks.



BY ELLEN MICHAUD • PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISA DILILLO

Sprawled on a white sand beach tucked among the limestone cliffs that line Bermuda's coast, Sally, Lisa, and I lazily watched our friend Jennifer as she paddled through the turquoise water of Horseshoe Bay in search of its luminescent fish.

Looking for all the world like a delighted two-year-old, Jennifer would paddle a little one way, peer intently down into the water near her toes, float a little forward, then stand up and skip sideways as she searched out the area's abundant aquatic life. Occasionally, she'd jump back as though some ethereal creature had lightly brushed her leg—and once in a while she'd shoot straight up as though something had taken a more substantial nibble on her bottom.

Caliban the dolphin teaches Sally how to let go and share a dance.



On land, Lisa and I chuckled as we watched, while Sally, her blonde hair tangled by the wind and a far-away look in her eyes, alternately watched and dug in the sand, running her fingers through its silky texture and puzzling over its origins.

It had been a wild week filled with sunny beaches, narrow island streets, azure seas, sea turtles, horse-drawn carriages, taxi drivers who reached out their windows to pick jasmine, huge platters of fresh fruit, and conversations with one crazy, wonderful woman after another.

Along with 1,400 other passengers, 121 Curves' women had set sail in Philadelphia on the Royal Caribbean *Empress of the Seas*, bound for Bermuda and a week of snorkeling, diving, shopping, and exploring.

Sandy Spencer, the Curves Travel person who handled the details of our adventure, had promised we'd have a blast. And—except for one unforgettable day of what our Norwegian captain delicately referred to as “motion in the ocean”—we certainly did.

Psst...

Curves Travel organizes various trips around the world at a discount to Curves members. Call 888-377-8613 to speak to a travel professional and get help planning your trip. You may want to talk to your club owner to help organize a group of members and to help promote the trip before booking. Curves members and their friends and family get preferred rates through Curves Travel for cruises, tours, and all-inclusive vacations.

Double Trouble

At first, most of us looked a little bemused by the whole thing, as though we couldn't really believe what we were doing. We looked cautiously at one another—side-long glances, quick smiles, brief questioning looks—each of us clearly wondering what kind of woman would throw off the constraints of home and work to jump on a ship with no other purpose than to play. There were no kids, parents, or bosses to care for, jobs to get to, beds to make, or errands to run. And almost every husband or significant other was left behind.

As I was sitting in the ship's espresso bar with Barbara Frazier and her sister-in-law Phyllis, it didn't take long to figure out what was going on. “We go on these things all the time,” chuckles Barb as she sips a latte and leans conspiratorially toward Phyllis. “And we leave the guys at home.”

“Oh, yeah,” agrees Phyllis, as she rolls her eyes. “And they appreciate us so-o-o much when we come back!”

The two exchange a look, then giggle.

“Although,” says Phyllis, trying to assume a straight face, “my husband and I had to come to an understanding about what he does in the house when I'm away.”

Barb ducks her head over her latte and tries not to snicker. In between giggles, the two women tell me how their esteemed

husband and brother-in-law tried to surprise his wife last year by wallpapering the living room while she was away. “He papered all four walls with silver foil wallpaper!” gasped Phyllis. “Can you believe it? Foil? On four walls?”

After an hour of stories about their adventures abroad and Phyllis's husband at home, I believe that there's a good-hearted man in Philadelphia who foils his walls, loves his wife, and is a complete pussycat for his grandbabies.

But I have also come to believe that these two women—serious professionals involved in the heavy, day-to-day issues of Philadelphia's schools and federal court system on shore—are two of the wisest women I've ever met. They know when it's time to play. They know when and how to ditch the heavy stresses of home, office, kids, and volunteer work at their church to kick back, relax, and have fun—something that many of us have forgotten how to do.

Women and Vacations

Today, women's days are consumed by work—both in the workplace and at home. Leisure time is at a premium; vacations practically nonexistent. A study by the Families and Work Institute reveals that one-third of working women do not get paid vacations, and of those lucky

few who do, 86% take less than 14 days a year. What's more, even women who do take those days use 20% of them to meet family responsibilities rather than get their nails done or sprawl on the beach with a book. That means that a serious number of women have just 11 days a year to kick back and do something for themselves.

“Our lives have become so unbalanced,” says Cathy O'Keefe, MEd. “I love that cell phone ad where the mother needs to go to a meeting in the office, but the kids want to go to the beach. So what happens? The mother takes her kids and a cell phone to the beach where she has a conference call as the children play.”

The disbelief in her voice is patent. Women are supposed to have grown beyond the do-it-all thing. But the superwoman syndrome seems alive and well, and, almost without our notice, it has become the default position of American culture. The thing is, in pushing us to “do it all,” says O'Keefe, the culture is robbing us of the very playfulness that balances our lives.

Why is playfulness so important? For one thing, it counteracts the negative effects that chronic stress has on our health, says O'Keefe. “It also reenergizes us and helps us recover our spontaneity, our sense of wonder, and the creativity that's essential for personal growth.”

And not that anybody seems to care, she adds tartly, but “It feeds our souls and nurtures our hearts.”

Sally and the Dolphin

One woman who understands the importance of play is my friend Sally Donahue.

Two years ago, Sally divorced her husband of 27 years. He had serious problems with alcohol, and Sally realized that she couldn't save him from himself. But she hadn't even finished mourning the end of her marriage before she was mourning

Getting Your Joy Back

Too many of us are weighed down by work and responsibility that we've forgotten how to play. Here's how to get your joy back.

THINK LIKE A KID. Ask yourself, “What made me laugh as a kid?” suggests Cathy O'Keefe, a certified therapeutic recreation specialist at the University of South Alabama in Mobile. Whether it's painting your toenails fire-engine red, loading your arms with sparkly bracelets, or hula-hooping down Main Street, give it a whirl—and see if it doesn't make you laugh again.

TRAVEL. Awe and wonder give birth to playfulness, says O'Keefe. “So put yourself in environments in which they can happen.” It may be diving off the coast of Bermuda, stroking a dolphin, or just sitting on a rock overlooking a turquoise sea. Wherever you find an environment that takes your breath away—that's where you should be.

GO TO PLAY KINGDOM. Many of us spend more time chauffeuring our kids than playing with them. Yet kids hold the keys to the play kingdom. So pull on an old ball gown, buy a plastic tiara, and invite your kids to your basement castle.

SUSPEND TIME. “A personal retreat is fertile ground for playfulness,” says O'Keefe. “I went to a Jesuit retreat center once, took my watch off and slept for 33 hours over the three days. Then I found myself writing poetry and drawing, which I hadn't done in years!”

TAKE A RISK. Angie Miller, owner of the Spring City Curves in Pennsylvania, encourages her club's members to do things that they're just a little bit afraid to do. “Push it,” Angie says. “It's exhilarating!”

North Coventry, Pennsylvania, Curves owner Tiffani Dewees agrees—and practices what she preaches. On the *Empress of the Seas*, Tiff was both terrified and intrigued by the hundred-foot rock wall on the ship's fantail. If a wave lifted the ship's nose up, the fantail would plunge downward and cause Tiff—tethered by a climbing rope hooked to her belt—to swing out past the ship's railing and over the ocean hundreds of feet below.

It was scary. But early one morning, Tiff hooked herself to the safety rope, strapped on a helmet, took a deep breath, and climbed. All the way to the top.

The look on her face when she returned to earth said everything.

—E.M.



Tiffani pushes through her fear.

him. Eighteen months after the divorce, he dropped dead.

From the little Sally allows her-

self to say, the two years following her divorce have been a maelstrom of emotion. Yet Sally is a survivor. Where others might have folded from the sheer weight of life, she put one foot in front of the other and began to shape a new one. She got an apartment in a lovely old Victorian house, began a new relationship, and supported her son as he went through the difficult process of rebuilding

the family house that he'd inherited from his dad. And Sally has a huge capacity for joy. Jennifer, Lisa, and I quickly figured that out when we met her onboard the *Empress* and dragged her into our girl group. At first, she was tentative about doing new things, and her eyes were often full of shadows. But every morning she put on her sunscreen, threw back her

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Amazing Grace ○ (continued from page 31)

that she's incredible. She has the potential to win, but you never know with America. It'll be announced before this article comes out, so everyone who's reading will know if I know what I'm talking about! [Ed note: *Melinda finished in third place overall.*]

diane: You've called your weight "the biggest struggle of my life." Do you find yourself frequently having to defend it, given the profession you've chosen?

MANDISA: I do. I think if I'd tried to go into the more mainstream market, as opposed to Christian music, I probably would have run into more problems, because mainstream music is an image-driven business. But I've had a difficult enough time of it just being in the public eye—people saying things on the Internet, in particular, where they feel as though they can say anything, no matter how hurtful, because they're anonymous.

I get it, though. I mean, before I did *Idol*, I read those magazines. I like seeing the stars without their makeup... I just don't Google my name anymore, because I never know what I'm going to see!

diane: There's a firestorm of controversy these days about models being under-

weight and yet, we expect any woman in the spotlight to be very thin. When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

MANDISA: I don't have blinders on, so I certainly see the things I don't like about myself. But I know that beauty isn't defined as a size 0 and that I'm beautiful—that the Lord has given me beautiful qualities on the outside. And I also know that those things aren't what make me valuable. My relationship with the Lord, the fact that He redeemed me and gave my life a purpose—that's where my value comes from.

diane: You have a new book out called *Idoleyes: My New Perspective on Faith, Fat, and Fame*. What's your new perspective?

MANDISA: My faith, my fat, and my fame were all thrust into the public view during my time on *Idol*, and they all changed in some way as a result. While I was on the show, there were times when I questioned a lot of things—is this really how it's supposed to be? Am I really supposed to be persecuted like this? My faith was tested—as was my ability to value myself despite my size—and I left the show stronger as a result. I was tested, and now I believe not just because I was taught to but because of my experiences.

As for fame, after I got off the *American Idol* tour, I realized I had drifted away from my relationships—with the Lord, with some friends. It was hard for me to be as open as I once was. I was famous. I had everything I'd ever wanted—money, a new house, a new car—and I was empty.

I realized that fame isn't what life is all about—but I don't think that's a perspective I could have come to before I'd achieved some fame. When I didn't have any money, when I had zero in my bank account, you never would have heard me say that it's not about the money [laughing!] But now that I'm not struggling in that area, I get that it's not important at all.

diane: Who is your American idol?

MANDISA: [immediately] Whitney Houston. There are a lot of people I look up to, but growing up, in the bathroom, I'd have a radio in there and I'd grab my curling iron and play my CDs and pretend to be Whitney. Always pretending to be Whitney.

diane: Perhaps now, little girls, curling irons in hand, are pretending to be you.

MANDISA: *That* would be amazing. ●

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shoulders, tilted her chin into the wind, and headed out to play with us. One day it was helmet diving (don't ask), another day it was snorkeling. Still another day it was playing in the sand at Horseshoe Bay.

But the adventure I remember best was our trip to Dolphin Quest on the western tip of Bermuda. Inside the hundred-year-old walls of an old fort, a large lagoon had been divided into four sections. Dolphins not participating in the interaction swam freely and played in one section, while a dolphin trainer took small groups

of people into another area of the lagoon to play with a dolphin.

And there went Sally, bundled in a life vest, pulling on water shoes and sliding into the pool. Under a trainer's guidance, Sally paddled around the pool with Caliban, a beautiful bottlenose, pregnant with her third calf. Sally learned to call the dolphin by smacking the surface of the water with her hands. She tossed colored rings to the dolphin to retrieve. Then the trainer gave a signal, and Caliban—all nine feet of her—rose vertically and held out her flip-

pers to Sally. Way outside her comfort zone as she looked 500 pounds of dolphin in the face, Sally still couldn't resist the invitation. She placed her hands on Caliban's flippers, and the two began to move through the water as though they were dancing.

It was magic. When Sally looked up at Lisa standing beside the pool, the shadows in her eyes were gone.

She had remembered how to play. ●

ELLEN MICHAUD is a contributing editor to *diane*.