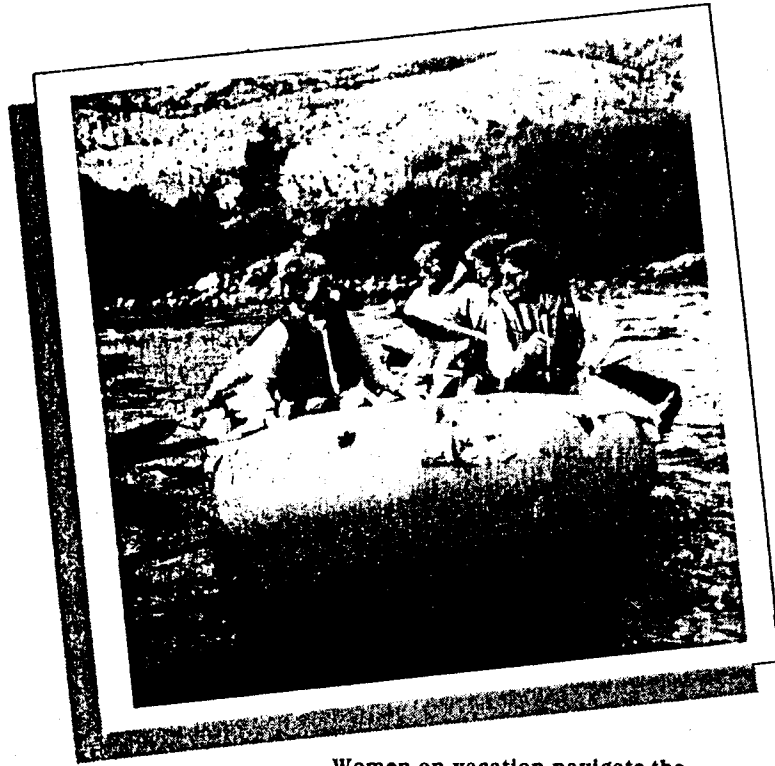


Discovering the great outdoors

A group for women over 40 explores a world unknown to them



Women on vacation navigate the Yellowstone River in a raft.

By Christine McPartland
Special to The Globe

Rhoda Barker, 60, of Wellesley has always enjoyed the outdoors, but she accepted long ago that she was never going to coax her husband into joining her on an active outdoor vacation. In the fall of 1983, while pondering how to spend five weeks off from her job as a buyer at Raytheon, Barker saw her dream vacation advertised in a local newspaper.

"Wanted," the ad read. "Eight adventurous women to hot-tub, swim, ski and more in Yellowstone. No experience necessary." There was one unusual requirement: All these adventurers had to be women 40 or older. "When I first saw the ad, I thought, 'What a great idea for singles!'" Barker recalls. "Then I signed up anyway and found every one of the women was leaving a contented husband behind at home. It was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life."

At 40, 50 or older, a growing number of women like Barker are just learning how to climb hills, canoe, fish, camp, ride horseback and just get back to nature in general, thanks to a go-getting 56-year-old Groton woman named Marion Stoddart and an organization called Outdoor Vacations For Women Over 40.

An internationally recognized conservationist and co-founder of the Boston-based Women Outdoors, Stoddart decided two years ago that it was time to start enjoying the outdoors she had worked to protect all her life. In the mid-'60s, she organized and chaired the Nashua River Watershed Assn., a group of environmental activists devoted to saving the Nashua River, a tributary of the Merrimack that flows from Fitchburg north to New Hampshire. "At that time it was considered one of the 10 most polluted rivers in the United States," Stoddart says. "It stank so. You could smell it miles away. There was so much sludge - fish gills and trash - birds could walk right across the top of the water."

In 1980 the Nashua River was at last clean enough for canoeing, swimming and even fishing. Stoddart retired. "I had hit 50 years old and wasn't sure how long I would have left to do things outdoors," she recalls. Later that year, she helped organize Women Outdoors and set to work arranging outdoor trips and challenges for women of all ages. Although thrilled with the group's concept and success, Stoddart found she couldn't help feeling like the token senior woman. "I kept thinking there had to be other women my age who would love to share my outdoor interests and energy. I wanted to get them together."

In the fall of 1983, she founded Outdoor Vacations for Women Over 40 and led 13 women, ages 45 to 64, to Yellowstone and Montana. For most of the women, it was their first trip away from their families and husbands.

"What participants say they value most about the trips is that they were stretched," Stoddart says. "They pushed themselves. They gave themselves permission to do things they had never done before." Things like rafting overnight on the Yellowstone River, camping on a secluded island, meeting a bison during a fireside supper, greeting a rutting elk along a hiking trail, taking a dip in a hot spring, riding horseback

through the Absaroka Mountains in Yellowstone. "One woman had a friend ask her what in heck she was doing, going on a sports vacation at her age," Stoddart recalls. "All the woman could say was, 'Beats me!'"

Stoddart currently leads four trips a year - two fall hiking-rafting treks, a March cross-country ski adventure (both to Yellowstone and Montana), and a summer journey to New Mexico. Although Stoddart's goal is to help her women vacationers learn to appreciate nature and themselves, her excursions are hardly tests of endurance and discomfort. Stoddart purposely keeps her groups small - the maximum is 10 - to make sure no one feels left out or pressured into performing above her skill level. Lessons such as swimming, skiing and canoeing are available and encouraged.

When not camping out in tents or sleeping under western skies, travelers enjoy first-rate accommodations. Cross-country skiers spend their early days at Chico Hot Springs, an old western lodge just north of Yellowstone National Park, noted for serving the best food in Montana. During the second week, skiers bunk in rustic cabins at Lone Mountain Ranch and travel in a roomy coach van.

Stoddart's excursions aren't cheap, but fees of \$1570 to \$1770 per person include lessons, food,

transportation and the services of a trained female guide. Most of Stoddart's alumnae insist the experience has paid off in far more than good photographs for the family album.

"It has been a year since our Montana adventure, and I still marvel at the change in my life," Jean McDuffy of Brockton, a past vacationer, wrote to Stoddart last November. "You all gave me the courage to do things I thought were too challenging or sometimes too foolish. Don't forget, I had never been on a horse before." McDuffy came home from Montana only to pack up again and head to Alaska for a two-week trip with two female friends.

For many women, like 46-year-old Kay McGillviray of Chelmsford, the greatest satisfaction came from pitching their own tents, from proving to themselves that they could make it without a man by their sides. "It was the first time I'd ever been on a trip without my husband," McGillviray admits. "I was so dependent on him, and he knew it. My husband was the one who gave me the birthday check for the cost of the trip. He wanted me to go. My two sons, 22 and 23, thought I couldn't do it because I was a woman. It was hard. I got homesick. I called home and fell apart, but after a few days it was wonderful. I learned you can do things good for yourself."

Betty Sylvestro, 67, a retired professor of Asian history from Groton, says she signed up for Stoddart's vacation "just to go down the Yellowstone River in a raft. As a young person, I'd done canoeing in Maine and whitewater in Wisconsin. I'd always wanted to see Montana," Sylvestro says. "I'm not a female jock. Even though I was an outdoor person, I was apprehensive. But I learned I didn't have to be capable of hanging on a rope across water to keep up. When friends ask me if it was strenuous - could they do it? - I tell them that if this hothouse flower can do it, any woman my age can."

Rhoda Barker spent the last two days of her Montana/Yellowstone dream ski vacation grounded with a twisted knee, but she insists that the personal freedom she experienced more than made up for any temporary bum leg. "In all of the years I've been married, whenever we took a trip, it was because I suggested it, planned it and packed everybody's bags," she laments. "For this vacation, all I had to do was pack my own, kiss the family goodbye, and enjoy."

For more information, contact Marion Stoddart, Outdoor Vacations for Women Over 40, PO Box 200, Groton, Mass. 01450. 448-3331.