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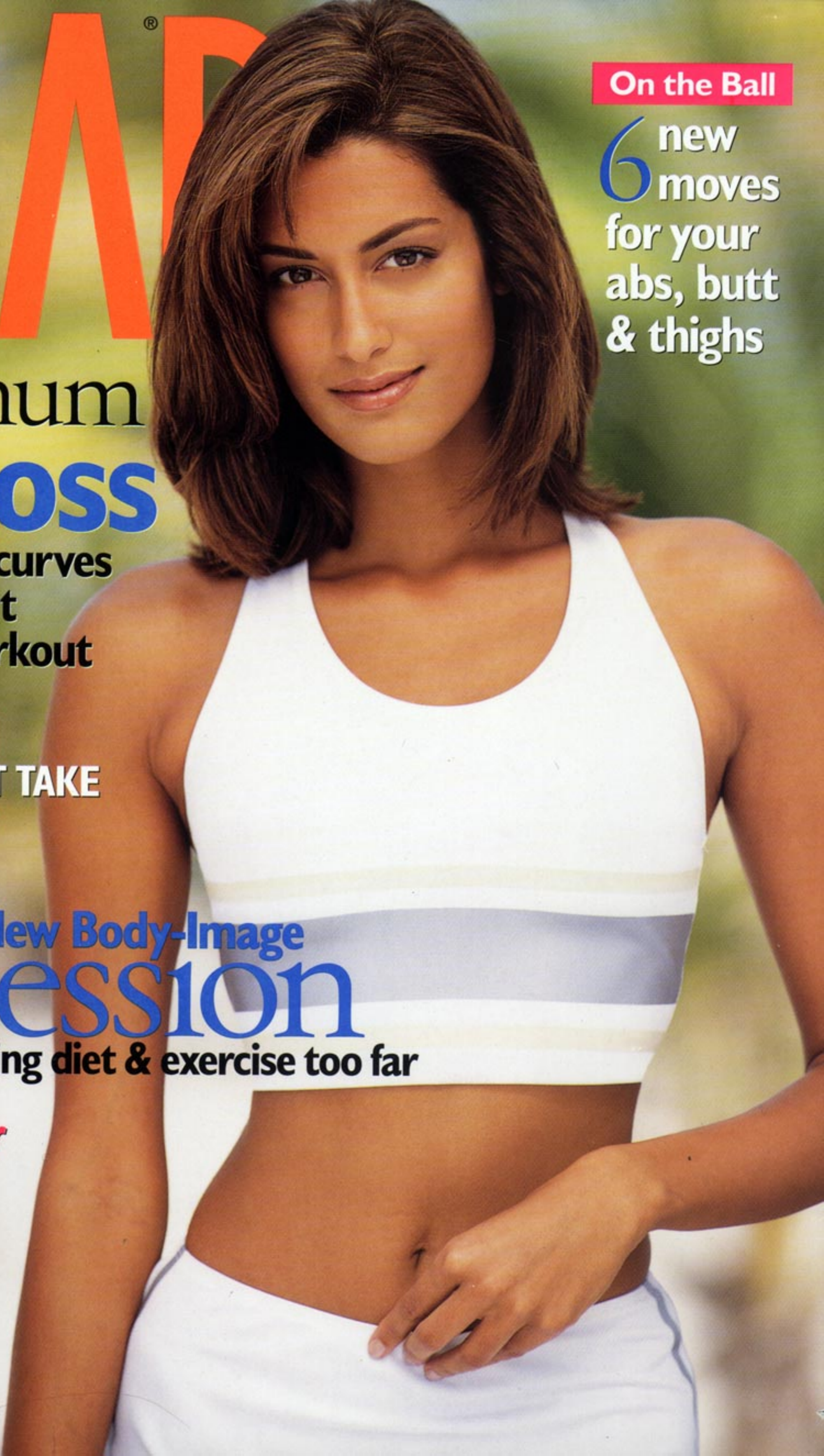
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y kingdom is bordered by a tamarisk tree to the east and a shattered sculpture of red rock to the west. It includes a stand of cottonwood trees, a patch of milkweed, and plenty of sage and rabbitbrush. The confluence of Sand Creek and the shallow Escalante River marks the northern boundary, and the whole is cupped by southwestern Utah's signature fiery red rock and toasted sandstone cliffs. A week before, I would have seen only magnificent desolation, but now, I see everything I need to survive.

I had just been ushered to my spot by my instructors from Boulder Outdoor Survival School. For the past six days, we — three instructors and seven students — had been on walkabout, a course combining a hands-on seminar in primitive living skills with virtually nonstop hiking. The Escalante National Monument, a vast area midway between Bryce and Capitol Reef national parks, made a perfect classroom. Its high-desert topology ranges from wind-scoured buttes and mesas that are gradually being ground into sand by time and the elements, to twisted ponderosas and waist-high shrubs, to sheltered streams and springs, each its own self-contained Eden.

High up on the cliffs and far back in secret canyons are Anasazi dwellings and pictographs, the eroding evidence of past human existence in this harsh environment. No one lives in this vast emptiness now. It's a forbidding place, a place that punishes mistakes and sometimes doesn't allow second chances.

Before we scare you desert neophytes away, we should explain that the BOSS program is in a league of its own in that it minimizes dependence on modern technology and maximizes natural resources. In other words, it's the most hard-core desert-survival program you can find — without enlisting in the Army, that is.

*the sands of*  
time

**The desert** may seem harsh and forbidding — like a vast sandbox without mercy. But go in with the right skills and knowledge, and you're likely to find beauty, truth — and maybe even a lost part of yourself. **By Catherine Fredman**







## desert survival tips

Hiking and camping in the desert can be one of the most relaxing experiences you'll ever have — provided you follow the rules from BOSS. Break even one and you may wish you'd never heard of the place.

- Wear proper clothing. The desert is no place to make a fashion statement, so don't even *think* about wearing a tank top and short shorts. You'll be working on a bad sunburn before you can remember what SPF stands for. For ventilation, wear loose-fitting clothes in lightweight, light-colored fabrics. Pants are better than shorts at protecting your legs from sun and scratches. And don't forget to wear a broad-brimmed hat to keep your ears from turning into potato chips.
- Wear shoes designed for hiking. Sturdy soles provide a barrier against burning sands and sneaky cactus.
- Bring plenty of sunscreen (at least SPF 30), and apply it frequently, especially after washing, swimming or profuse sweating.
- Drink at least a gallon of water per day (this will vary depending on the temperature and your activity level). Drink *before* you feel thirsty.
- Eat small, high-carbohydrate snacks frequently to fight exhaustion. To prevent heat exhaustion, salty snacks are better than sweet ones.
- In hot weather, hike in early morning or late in the day. Always rest 10 minutes every hour; use the time to drink water.
- To avoid poisonous creatures, put hands and feet only where you can see them. Shake out clothes and shoes before putting them on, and never stroll around barefoot. Carry a first-aid kit as well as a snakebite kit.
- Hike on marked trails. If you must leave the trail, mark your route with rock cairns or patterns of three rocks.
- Avoid deep canyons and washes. Even if the sky is clear, a storm miles away could have dumped enough water to create a flash flood.
- Sign the trail register, and always tell a friend or park ranger where you are going and when you plan to return.

## “Your best canteen

But that doesn't mean you have to be a desert rat or a drill sergeant to qualify. “As long as you're in relatively good shape, adventurous and open to a challenge, you're welcome,” says Renee Goddard, an instructor with BOSS. “We get a lot of women from big cities who have never laid out a sleeping bag before, or even carried a backpack. They come to learn about the desert as well as to test their own limits — to discover how they fare when they shed the excesses and simplify to the core.”

Goddard says even the most urban warriors “are surprised at how quickly they adjust to what initially seems like a hostile environment. They become synchronized with the rhythms and ways of the desert very fast and realize how much they have inside them to carry them along,” she says. “Plus, getting rid of all the excess makes it easier to see how little you really need to be happy. It's an important lesson for life.”

She was right: By the sixth day, when I embarked on my 24-hour solo, the culmination of the course, to my surprise I actually felt pretty comfortable about the prospect, thanks to ancient lessons that still hold true today. They made the desert doable.

That was what appealed to my fellow hikers and me. Although we came from different parts of the country and hailed from backgrounds ranging from computer troubleshooter to dental hygienist, we all had the same reason for taking the course: We had spent enough time in the wilderness to fear the effects of Murphy's Law. We wanted to learn what to do when the matches get soaked, a bear shreds the tent or the raft dumps all the gear. What better place to learn than in an environment that gets nearly no rain and where the temperature swings 50 degrees in any given day. What better way to learn than with an equipment list I could count on the fingers of one hand — and didn't include a tent, sleeping bag, mattress pad, matches or toilet paper.

If you prefer a more gentle introduction to the desert, many guided programs utilize modern-day conveniences like tents, sleeping bags and freeze-dried gourmet dinners. Some even provide overnight lodging at dude ranches or bed-and-breakfasts. (See “The Softer Side of Sand” on page 126.) With guided desert programs, the only “survival skills” you're likely to need are applying enough sunscreen, avoiding prickly plants and carrying ample water. (And if you forget any of them, your guide surely will remind you.)

### Beyond the Paved Road

Our adventure began on day 1, when a van dumped us at the end of a dirt track, where a sign ominously proclaimed, “Road closed ahead.” The dust from the disappearing van gradually was replaced by the vanilla scent of sun-warmed ponderosa pines. A dry wind flickered through the rabbitbrush. In silence, we walked past the road sign and left civilization behind.

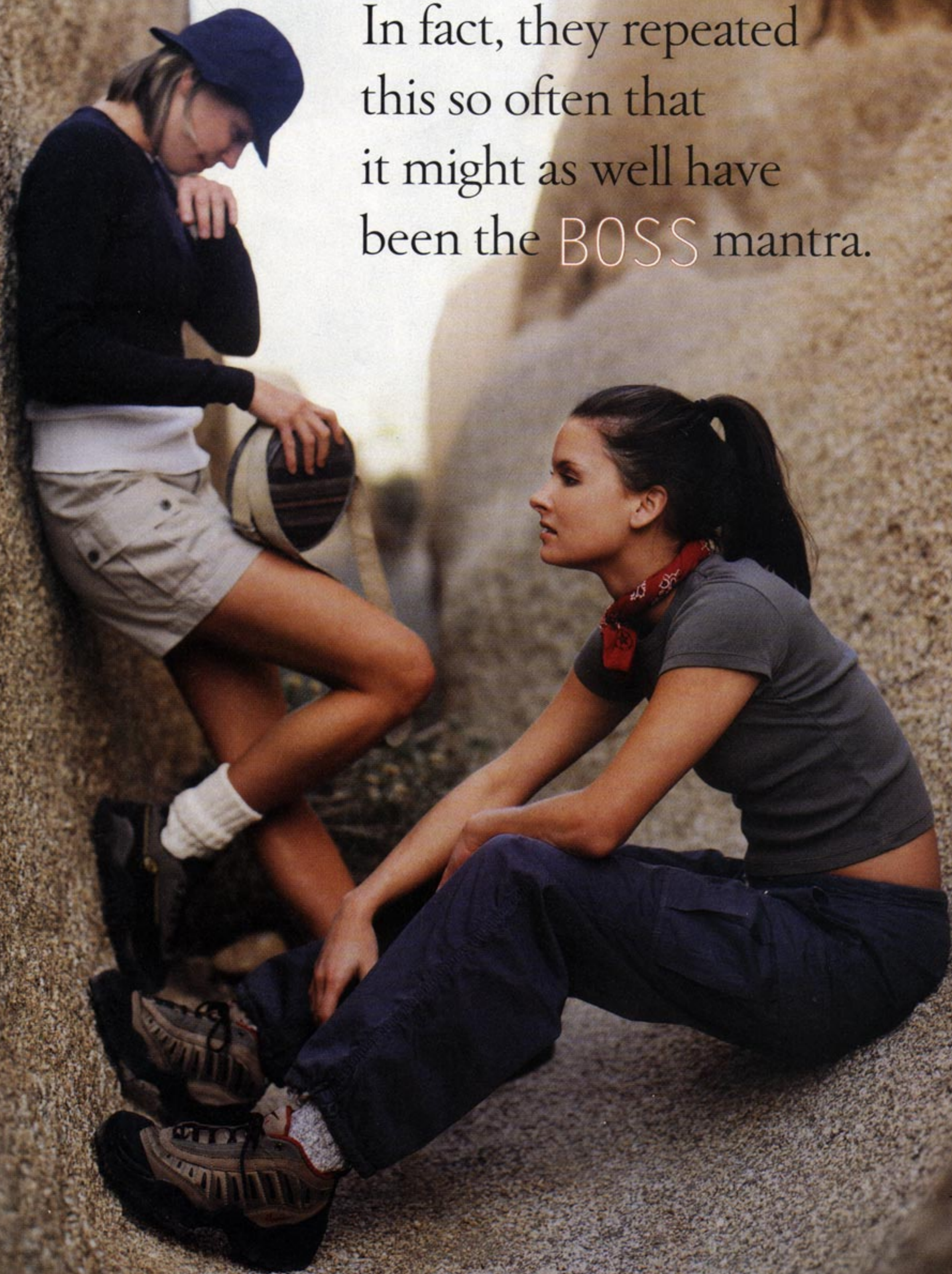
Just how far behind soon was made startlingly clear. Rob Withrow, one of the instructors, called us into a circle near a clump of sagebrush and announced, “There are no Charmin bushes out here,” he said. “Use a handful of dust. Either pat it on the spot or toss it up, then whisk it away with rabbitbrush or sage.” Rob added, “You can use a stick or pine needles, but if they're used incorrectly, you'll find yourself in a sensitive situation.” I compared the soft, aromatic sage leaves to the scrawny stalks of rabbitbrush and quickly decided that sagebrush would be this girl's best friend.

With the most critical element of basic hygiene taken care of, our group began hiking — and hiking and hiking. Our plans were to hike until dusk. None of us really knew how far we'd hike by day's end, because the experience was more important than the distance covered. And because we weren't allowed to wear watches, we had no concept of time.

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is your belly," the instructors said. In fact, they repeated this so often that it might as well have been the BOSS mantra.





## Desert Survival

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At a breath-robbing pace, we clambered up through the scrub, marched along barren watercourses, shuffled through sand too bright to squint at and swatted our way among willows that promised water but didn't deliver. As I hiked along, I learned three things: You don't stop for a breath until you reach the top of a hill; putting pebbles in your mouth fools your body into salivating; and as long as the shadow of the person in front of you keeps moving, so do you. I also learned there wasn't any point in suggesting lunch. "We eat when we find it," Rob said.

And find it we eventually did. Scott Cunningham, another instructor, called us into a circle surrounding a small, spiky plant. "There have been instances when people have survived mainly on thistles," Rob said. Seven pairs of eyes honed in on the plant. Scott whipped a wicked-looking knife out of his neck sheath and knelt down to give the thistle the coup de grace. After scraping off the fibrous outer layer, he sliced the stalk into 2-inch sections, one for each of us. It tasted vaguely like raw broccoli stems. A handful of nearby waxy pink milkweed flowers followed, which tasted as sweet and chewy as raisins. And that was lunch. It was washed down with a few cups of water from a tadpole-infested pond that we carefully purified with a few drops of water purifier. (Some people didn't purify their water and within a few days had giardiasis.)

"Your best canteen is your belly," the instructors said. (In other words, whenever water is available, drink it, regardless of whether you're thirsty.) They repeated this statement so often that it might as well have been the BOSS mantra. The dryness of the desert climate exacerbated by the altitude — about 6,000 feet — made it imperative to drink at least a gallon of water a day to preclude heat stroke. We also were instructed to monitor our urine — clear and copious is good, scant and cloudy means you need to drink more water. Drink before you're thirsty, we were told, and drink

## the softer side of **S a n d**

You don't have to sleep in a hand-dug "grave" or eat sagebrush to enjoy a camping trip in the desert. The following outfits offer guided treks in the desert that focus on the natural beauty and terrain rather than teaching Marine-style survival skills. In the process, you'll learn how to be safe in the desert.

**Wilderness Adventures** offers three-day to weeklong guided backpacking treks with naturalists in desert regions throughout the Southwest, including the Grand Canyon. Hikers average five to seven miles daily on moderate terrain. Price for a three-day trek in the Grand Canyon environs is \$325. For more information, call (602) 949-2774.

**Earth Treks** offers guided eight-day treks in desert regions throughout southern Utah, with a special emphasis on the natural environment and American Indian history and cultures. Hiking distances range from four to eight miles daily with low to moderate gains in elevation. Price for an eight-day trip is \$750, including guide service and meals. For more information, contact Earth Trek at (800) 589-4770 or (207) 589-4770.

**Sierra Club Outings** offers guided day hikes as well as weekend to weeklong car camping and backpacking trips in the vicinity of the undeveloped North Rim of the Grand Canyon. Cost is \$450 for a seven-day trip and includes guide service. The majority of hiking is on moderate terrain, with more difficult optional excursions into the canyon. For more information, contact Sierra Club Outings at (415) 997-5522.

**American Wilderness Experience** offers six-day guided hiking trips in Bryce and Zion national parks with overnight stays in park lodges and van shuttles to trail heads. On any given day, participants can choose from trails ranging from easy to difficult. Price for six-day trips is \$1,298 and includes guides, meals and accommodations. For more information, call (800) 444-0099 or (303) 444-2622.

**Off the Beaten Path** offers a variety of guided desert hiking adventures in Arizona, Colorado and Utah with overnight lodging in guest ranches and historic hotels. Price for a 10-day "Mountains and Canyons of the Four Corners" is \$1,540, and includes accommodations and some excursions such as an archeology expedition, a jeep tour, guided mountain biking and jet boating. For more information, call (800) 445-2995 or (406) 586-1311. Or enjoy a guided eight-day Arizona Hiking: "Canyons and Cuisine" adventure, with overnight lodging in bed-and-breakfasts. Cost is \$1,960 and is all-inclusive.

whenever water is available. (I carried around a 1-liter water bottle; other people carried two bottles, and in retrospect, I wish I had, too.)

The major problem is finding the stuff. Cottonwood trees are a good water indicator; if there's water nearby, their roots will find it, and their tall trunks and spreading branches act as a signal. Animal tracks are another good clue. They're seen most easily in the early-morning or late-afternoon light, but if you squint, even the most barren

hill will reveal a faint network of trails.

Eventually, the dusty lines would converge, form a more visible track and lead to the jackpot. Some days, I happily would have traded the pot of gold at the foot of a rainbow for a stream of fresh water.

### Digging Your Own Grave

As dusk fell, we set up camp — a simple enough endeavor when there's no tent. Getting a good night's sleep began with digging a hole in the ground,



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SHAPE **COOKS**

## Desert Survival

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a hole disconcertingly shaped like a grave because it should be big enough in which to lie down and deep enough to keep you out of the wind.

I then lined the hole with armfuls of rabbitbrush and sage to make a springy mattress pad to cushion me and keep my body heat from dissipating into the earth. Finally, I folded my blanket and poncho into a sort of taco shell, then slipped inside — just like the filling.

Despite the heat during the day, desert nights can be frigid. At least I had come prepared with the right clothing. When I woke up shuddering in the chill after moonset, I pulled on my long underwear, fleece top, down-filled ski jacket, hat and gloves. Then I gazed at the stars — undiluted by haze, light or moisture — until I warmed up again and drifted off. Talk about feeling at one with the universe!

During the week, I learned plenty of physical survival skills: how to make a friction fire with a bow drill and spindle that I whittled out of wood and rock; twist milkweed fibers into reasonably sturdy rope; catch trout with my bare hands and gut it with a flake of obsidian; and brush my teeth with a cottonwood twig (its astringent qualities help fight plaque).

Other lessons weren't practical but were no less tangible. As I metamorphosed from 20th-century trail hiker to primitive hunter-gatherer, I realized that I had changed the way I walked. I looked down less often. I let my feet instinctively find the right placement. And as I looked around more, I noticed more things. And the more I noticed, the more beautiful and approachable the landscape became. For the first time in my life, I felt at ease in the wilderness. I actually was looking forward to my upcoming solo.

### A Lesson in Solitude

The day and night that you spend on your own is the culmination of the BOSS course. "This is your space, your time," Rob said emphatically. "You will never have that in the real world, so be

here in the here and now."

I had planned all sorts of activities: improve my whittling skills, peck out a stone bowl, go fishing. But then I suddenly seemed to hear Rob admonishing me to "Take your time, woman. No need to rush." (This was Rob's mantra, and he reminded me of it at least once a day.)

I slowed down to what I had come to think of as desert time, a mental and physical energy-conserving duet in which your movements are as deliberate and as fluid as tai chi. I chose a spot for my blanket roll, tanked up on water, settled down under a cottonwood tree and simply watched the shadows shift on the red-rock walls to the accompaniment of humming insects and twittering swallows.

From time immemorial, people have gone into the desert in search of visions. I wasn't looking for one, but I, too, had a revelation as I watched the moon rise over the Escalante River. Like life, the desert is what you make of it. Some people fear it. In truth, the desert isn't a place to be taken lightly, but neither does it always have to be an adversary. In return for my respect and open mind, the desert gave me the gift of great beauty and a contentment so deep I didn't even question it. The peace that passeth understanding was its own reward.

### Details

Boulder Outdoor Survival School offers courses ranging from weeklong primitive skills techniques taught at a wilderness base camp to field courses (such as my walkabout), which range from a week to 27 days. Cost for the seven-day field course is \$825, and it is offered June through August. The women's-only course runs July 25-31 for the same price. Group size is limited to 12. BOSS provides a list of required equipment, most of which you can rent or buy through the school's store. For more information, contact Boulder Outdoor Survival School, Box 1590, Boulder, CO 80306; (800) 335-7404 or (303) 444-9779. ■

Catherine Fredman is a free-lance writer and editor in New York City.