

# *Elegance* CASUAL AND COWBOY HATS

Lake Austin Spa Resort is a healthy oasis  
in the heart of Texas Writer Amber Gibson



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Guests meet with a nutritionist upon arrival to develop a personal diet plan; healthy gourmet food makes dining a highlight; the resort incorporates fitness, nutrition and spiritual well-being into a holistic programme



Lake Austin Spa Resort is now recognised as one of the top destination spas in the US, but the luxurious property has a humble history. In the 1940s, a small fishing camp was built and day guest boaters were encouraged to drop anchor and visit for dinner, dancing and live music. Three decades later, Lake Austin was home to a short-lived nudist colony followed by a rodeo camp. Since 1978, it has been a health resort although over the years focus has shifted from weight loss to education on healthy lifestyle choices, incorporating fitness, nutrition and spiritual well-being into a holistic programme.

After new owners purchased the property in 1997, there were multimillion-dollar renovations and the 25,000sqft spa opened in 2004, vaulting this unassuming retreat to the top of destination spa rankings. The property is still small, with just 40 rooms,



many with porches and all with either lake or garden views of Texas Hill Country. This ecologically mindful resort is a certified wildlife and monarch butterfly habitat and landscaping utilises native plants to reduce water use. Electric car charging stations are available and used linens, blankets and sheets are donated to local animal shelters.

All-inclusive packages include three healthy meals each day and plenty of snacks in between. All the food is fresh and flavourful and you certainly won't go hungry. There are a plethora of fitness classes and cultural activities, ranging from stargazing to tarot card readings. Every morning a two-hour scenic forest bathing hike criss-crosses the property's 19 lakefront acres, and several times a week there's a midday cruise on Lake Austin.

#### DAY 1

I'm greeted warmly at check-in, given a refillable yellow water bottle inscribed with

my name and offered refreshing hibiscus berry iced tea. In the midst of a property welcome tour, the mouth-watering scent of smoky meat wafts toward me and I'm drawn to the winter barbecue cooking demonstration by local Austin guest chef and pitmaster Evan LeRoy. It's fitting that my first bites in Texas are of tender brisket and juicy chicken wings. However, this is a far cry from the spa food I expected. "Sometimes the guest chefs don't follow the health guidelines," my guide and PR maven Darlene Fiske says with a rueful grin. The culinary experience at Lake Austin features monthly guest chefs from New York, Miami, Chicago and Los Angeles, who lead cooking demonstrations in the show kitchen. While the menus for breakfast, lunch and dinner are precisely labelled with calorie counts and nutritional content, clearly this isn't a militant operation and small indulgences are permitted. You can even ring a bell by the kitchen for a petite cup of frozen yogurt at any time – the flavours change daily.

Eating well is a choice, and Lake Austin certainly gives guests the tools to do so. Meet with a nutritionist upon arrival to develop a personal plan for better eating habits at home, when you don't have dedicated chefs preparing meals for you each day. After determining your resting

metabolic rate and level of fitness activity, you'll have a benchmark for how many calories to consume each day.

I get my bearings on the first day – coming from frigid Chicago winter to warm, balmy Texas is a relief. After an initial consultation and orientation, I settle in by the azure pool to read a book. There's a beautifully stocked library adjacent to the lobby, and I pick up a colourful volume on Claude Monet and Impressionism. I remember how much I enjoyed my Impressionism art history class at university and figure I'll let go of work stress as hectic big city living slips away.

After a gentle afternoon stretch class, I dress for dinner, where I see several guests dining in their bathrobes. With hastily tied topknots and glowing complexions, I surmise that they've come straight from the spa. Everything on the menu looks delicious and even the decadent-sounding striploin steak with bordelaise sauce clocks in at less than 500 calories. I opt for the pan-seared striped bass in lobster and lemon balm bouillon, and after the first few bites of flaky fish with perfectly crisped skin, am already looking forward to several more meals. There are specials each night so guests staying a week or longer won't tire of the food.



THIS PAGE: Join the Lakefit paddleboard boot camp for a fun fitness experience. OPPOSITE PAGE: Relax in the pool between workout sessions

## DAY 2

The morning begins with a knock on my door – breakfast in bed promptly delivered, with soft-boiled eggs, an English muffin and a bowl of fresh berries. Just the right light start that won't weigh me down before Pilates. After an invigorating workout, I explore the organic garden, where more than 1,000 species of herbs, vegetables, spices and wildflowers thrive in the mild Texas climate. There are more than 20 kinds of peppers and more than 30 types of tomatoes, along with sweet potatoes, asparagus and corn. How inspiring for Executive Chef Stephane Beaucamp to have all of this within walking distance of his kitchen. Gardening and aromatherapy classes are offered weekly and the chefs can be seen snipping plants to use in the kitchen. Food scraps and coffee grounds

## Focus has shifted from weightloss to education on healthy lifestyle choices, incorporating fitness, nutrition and spiritual well-being

make for rich compost to feed the garden in a cyclical relationship.

My next fitness class is core conditioning, where a tall, handsome Australian trainer takes me through a series of abdominal crunches, side planks and twists. "It's not about the number of repetitions,"

says former rugby player Michael Kubyk. Instead, he emphasises the importance of maintaining proper form, moving with control and challenging yourself. "You should be gasping for air at this point," he says, prompting me to pick up the pace as I reach for the ceiling with my legs hovering above the ground.

Lunch is simple but satisfying. I make a salad with vibrant greens, vegetables, nuts and dressings and order a protein plate with chicken breast, roasted wild mushrooms and grilled asparagus dressed with vegan pesto. Happily satiated, I'm ready to hit the water. Lake Austin Spa Resort has 12ft leg-powered stand-up boards (acquired last autumn) that allow you to literally walk on water. I'm familiar with stand-up paddleboards, but instead of a paddle, here you use pedals, targeting cardio, core





THIS PAGE: Some suites feature a hot tub. OPPOSITE PAGE: Settle in with a good book and wile away the afternoon in the garden library; ingredients including herbs, vegetables and spices are grown on-site in the organic garden

stability and leg strength. It's a lot of fun and you are less likely to fall in the water. Use of the boards is complimentary and they are also used during LakeFit boot camp and HIIT classes.

Walking up the long winding path to the LakeHouse Spa, I notice my mobile coverage cuts out, a helpful nudge forcing me to disconnect. Herbs from the organic garden are also used in several spa treatments here and at Aster Café for daytime spa dining. It's hard to select a treatment with more than 100 options, but I settle on a two-hour Tour of Texas, incorporating a prickly pear sugar scrub, agave body oil mask and custom massage with prickly pear lotion –

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the medley of native Texas flora nourishes my skin and body head-to-toe. After brief respite in the sauna, I sink into a couch in the blue room, nibbling raw almonds and

sipping camomile citron tea while waiting for my therapist. The blue room is charming – reminiscent of how an American granny might decorate her cottage, and the colours and decor have a cumulatively calming effect.

At some point, I drift off during my massage, but awaken with my skin silky smooth and smelling sweet and fruity. This evening, I'm the one dining in my bathrobe. It's the first time I've done so at a five-star resort and liberating to feel truly at home and completely casual. I'm curious about the vegetarian broccoli meatballs, which I order along with an arugula Caesar salad with nori and toasted hemp seeds. The



meatballs are much softer than I anticipated, like *gnudi* dumplings, but pair well with the acidic cherry tomato ratatouille. The dessert options are light enough and moderately portioned so you don't feel guilty for satisfying your sweet tooth. This evening, I try a trio of rich bite-sized chocolate ganache tarts. At any other restaurant these would be small enough to be mignardise, but I find the portion to be just right. A few bites is all I really need. It's nice to be tempted by something more refined than oversized chocolate bomb.

DAY 3

I hula-hooped before as a child, but it's been more than a decade since. Nevertheless, Lake Austin inspires me to try something



THIS PAGE: Lake Austin Spa Resort inspires guests to pursue a balanced lifestyle. OPPOSITE PAGE: Stunning sunset at Lake Austin

new and so I walk into Fitness Hoop Dance class with fitness expert Kim Patty, not sure what to expect. I am lucky to take a class with the woman who pioneered this programme of dance fitness, and luckily it comes back to me much like riding a bike. Soon, I'm twirling and stepping to a mix of contemporary pop and 80s classics. By the end of class, Patty is even teaching me tricks like how to gracefully get into the hoop and raise it above my head without missing a beat. "There's something about a hula hoop that just makes you giddy," she says. It's true – I've been smiling throughout the hour-long class. "You're having so much fun that you don't even realise how hard your body has been working the whole time." It's a great class for all levels, since it's low impact, but

raises your heart rate and engages the core. To cool down, we do a series of stretches with the hoop and I marvel at how versatile it is as a fitness prop.

LakeHouse Spa just debuted two intriguing new hydrotherapy treatments in February that are different from anything I've tried before. I'm instructed to wear a bathing suit and meet in the Pool Barn for a easy, gentle guided floating meditation. Something about the water is immediately relaxing, and I would recommend this treatment for anyone. For chronic pain and limited range of motion, consider assisted stretching in shallow waters with AquaStretch Myofascial. This treatment is similar to an underwater Thai massage, or a more active alternative to Watsu, restoring

mobility and flexibility while easing joint and muscle pain.

Every afternoon, hors d'oeuvres are presented in the garden library. Even though I've had lunch, I swing by to try the sweet potato hummus, garnished with microgreens and edible flowers. The subtly sweet, earthy flavour is an ideal final taste of Lake Austin.

On my way out, I stow away the custom-made lavender bath salts and body lotion in my suitcase as keepsake of my time here. Next week, I look forward to a serene evening at home recollecting the easy, breezy good times here and I leave inspired to be more conscious of portion control and to continue hula-hooping.

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