



Photos courtesy of Claire Dunn

**ABOVE:** Be honest: Wouldn't you really rather do this than climb Mount Marcy?

**LEFT:** No husbands, no kids and lots of smiles typify Bunco Weekend in Star Lake.

# Women without men

## Talk about paradise in the Adirondacks...

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**I**wondered if I should worry about the wind. It roared through the evergreens outside the venerable old camp on Star Lake, shaking the canvas window coverings on the sleeping porch while branches smacked the sides of the house. I decided if I heard cracking branches or breaking windows, I'd find a safer place to spend the night.

But I didn't budge from the bed where I was curled up just off the sleeping porch. My friend Linda remained fast asleep on the other side of the room. I didn't hear anybody moving around on the second floor of this creaking house, where six other friends were sleeping. No one seemed to be disturbed but me.

So I pulled up the covers and drifted back to sleep, an old brown wool blanket comforting and scratchy against my chin.

It was our annual Bunco Weekend at Star Lake in the northwestern Adirondacks, hosted by our friend Dorothy at her family's camp. Our group of 16 women gathers monthly at our homes at the eastern edge of the Finger Lakes to play a mindless dice game called bunco. The game is merely an excuse to eat, drink and talk.

Naturally, our connections have grown beyond bunco over the 13 years we've been playing. And never is that more apparent than during our annual summer weekend at Star Lake.

We've been making this trip since 1993. Our numbers vary, but typically there are

around 10 of us. We leave up to three dozen children motherless for the weekend, and we drive away from jobs in law, development and sales, as well as myriad family and community responsibilities.

Ecotourism might be a growing industry, but not because of us. Our trip might be defined as egotourism. The catch phrase for the weekend has become "It's all about me." Eat what you want when you want. Sleep late if you want. Swim if you want. Read a mindless gossip magazine. For women whose daily lives dance to the rhythm of other people's schedules, 2½ days away from the wife-mother-employee-volunteer routine is an exercise in self-indulgence.

Other people have asked me why we go to Star Lake. No spas. Hardly any place to shop or eat. No nightlife unless we create it ourselves. It doesn't seem like the kind of place that would attract a bunch of women who have left their 40th birthdays behind and have started celebrating or planning our 50th birthdays together.

But that's the appeal.

Star Lake's lack of distractions gives us

the freedom to focus on ourselves and on each other. It allows us to build a weekend around an elaborate flotilla of cheap inflatable rafts, tethered together with rope and centered around a floating cooler so we can launch ourselves to drift around the island to the sandbar while the conversation wanders.

Sometimes, the topics are harmless but enlightening. What are your kids' middle names? What are your parents' names? Learning that our fun-loving Dorothy had a grandmother named Electra shed some light on her tendency to lead us into adventure. Usually, we laugh until we hurt, our conversation stitched with off-color kidding that has become finely tuned to each personality over the years.

Other times, with no premeditation, we find ourselves plunged into painful, teary discussions. During sunny afternoons on the lake, we've learned about teetering marriages and we've helped pick up the pieces after some of them shattered. We packed up our heartbroken friend Kayla after an early-morning phone call

brought the sad news that she had lost her beloved grandmother. Last year, a call came from Dorothy on a dreary Sunday morning, sharing the news that her father had died after a long illness.

Our weekends are molded by these milestones as our lives are defined by them.

My attempts to document our times together bring a torrent of memories: the year Jacque got sick and spent the weekend in the hospital; the year we crashed a high school reunion; the year we hired a local pilot and photographer to fly over and take pictures of our flotilla. The memories have started to run together into a blur that we simply call Bunco Weekend.

I was running those memories through my head the night the wind was blowing, thinking how fortunate I was to have a claim, however temporary, to this little piece of the Adirondacks and this time away from my real life. And how lucky I was to have my friends nearby to keep me safe from the storm. ■

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