

Sandy Bornstein on a sunrise bicycle ride



A Respite from Grief A Week at Hilton Head Health

Story and Photos by Sandy Bornstein

For decades, Ira and I had explored the world. Initially, we traveled as a young couple. While our children were growing up in Illinois and Colorado, we embarked on engaging in family adventures. As empty nesters, we focused on our bucket list filled with worldwide destinations and romantic cruises. Unlike most people who did not travel during the pandemic, we were not deterred.

As soon as Ira had regained his strength from a craniotomy followed by six weeks of chemotherapy and radiation, we were on the road again while he was being treated with another six months of chemotherapy. To battle glioblastoma, we chose to embrace life rather than his terminal brain cancer.

In the aftermath of Ira's death in July 2023, I had to find a way to return to normalcy.

When grief consumed my daily thoughts and turned every week into an unexpected rollercoaster ride, I couldn't imagine how I would ever move forward and plan adventures alone. Would I be able to travel solo during the first year of grieving and write about my experiences? I didn't know.

Embracing Colorado's Outdoor Activities

Instead of becoming a recluse, I made a conscious effort to reap the benefits of living in Colorado. Weather permitting, I hiked on paths in the Front Range and ventured on easy trails in the Rocky Mountains. Enjoying nature while being physically active always lifted my spirits. Occasionally, family members and friends joined me. In December, my focus shifted to downhill skiing. Even though I had been skiing for longer than I had known Ira, I had yet to ski by myself.

During my first visit to Keystone Resort, I sat in the parking lot contemplating how long it would take to get out of the car. I eventually put on my ski boots and strolled to the nearby six-person chairlift. Since it was the beginning of the season, I ended up riding to the top of the mountain by myself. When it came time to raise the safety bar, I wasn't sure if my small stature could accomplish it. Fortunately, I was able to do it without an incident and my brief panic attack was abated.

While it is always more fun to ski with others, this winter season I skied more times solo. Throughout the season, I made it a priority to ski regularly. I joined 50+ ski groups at two resorts and skied with my children and grandchildren at Keystone Resort. Whenever possible, I visited Keystone's Bergman Bowl to enjoy the majestic panoramic views above the tree line. By the end of the season, I skied 35 times—30 at Keystone Resort and five times with the Over the Hill program at nearby Copper Mountain. This was the most that I had ever skied in a season.



Sandy Bornstein, her son Aaron, and Grandkids Hiking in CO Labor Day 2023



Sandy Bornstein skiing at Keystone Resort while grieving

View from Keystone Resort's Bergman Bowl





Sandy Bornstein Sunrise Walk



Wildlife at Beach

Beach Destination with an Abundance of Activities

In January, I was looking for a break from Colorado's winter wonderland. A few months earlier, I had taken my first European riverboat experience aboard Uniworld's River Empress and was now focusing on a restorative vacation. I had four priorities—a beach destination, an assortment of activities that included aquatic classes, healthy food options, and an easy transfer from the airport. For a few moments, I thought about a simple option, making a reservation at a beach resort. Then I started wondering if this was a wise choice for an inexperienced solo traveler. What type of activities would be geared to individuals? Would I be comfortable eating every meal by myself surrounded by couples and families?

When Ira was coping with brain cancer, we traveled to two wellness resorts in the desert—Arizona's Civana Wellness Resort & Spa and Utah's Red Mountain Resort. From these positive experiences, I knew that health and wellness facilities cater to single travelers, offer a wide variety of activities, and serve plant-based food options.

An internet search identified a few coastal domestic wellness retreats. After reviewing the online information, I called each place to learn more. The Hilton Head Health (HHH) representative answered my questions and reassured me that I would be staying in a safe and inclusive environment. I chose not to identify myself as a travel writer because I didn't anticipate writing about my experience.

Hilton Head Health Experience

I took the United Airlines nonstop flight from Denver to Savannah, Georgia. Within minutes of gathering my baggage, I was in a HHH courtesy van headed to the wellness retreat. About an hour later, I arrived. I was immediately whisked into the weekly orientation meeting where I was given an overview of the retreat's philosophy, a booklet of daily classes and activities, as well as a brief tour. Participants were reminded to sign up for the next day of classes. Since February is considered a low season, I always got my first choices. On more than one occasion, I had either a solo class or only a handful of other participants joining me.

Guests usually arrive on Sunday for the seven-day or longer programs. While there are multiple programs running simultaneously, most of the guests come to this resort for weight loss assistance. Even though my objectives were different, my individual needs were met every day.

From my first dinner until my last meal, I did not dine alone unless I chose to do so. The other guests always insisted that I join them. On more than one occasion, people seated at another table voluntarily moved to my table so that I would not have to eat by myself. The limited, calorie-conscious menu surprisingly caters to carnivores and people who consume dairy. As a pescatarian who rarely eats dairy, I had fewer options. However, the chef was willing to accommodate my dietary needs. Healthy snacks and beverages were also available throughout the day.



Salmon Burger served with Salad



Avocado Toast with corn and black bean salsa



Food Hearty Vegetarian Chili with Avocado slices



Barbeque Scallop Skewers on top of Quinoa and Bok Choy Garnished with Pineapple Salsa



Squash Quesadilla on Whole Wheat tortilla with side of corn and black bean salsa

The grounds of this resort were more compact than the Western wellness resorts that I previously visited. Those destinations catered to a larger audience. Guests staying for one of HHH's weeklong programs usually stay in one of the 30 comfortable rooms located at the onsite Sweetgrass Inn, while people staying for a few weeks or longer sometimes opt for an offsite condo. This relatively new hotel is very close to the outdoor pool, fitness classes, and dining room.

The impressive daily offerings fall into seven categories—Walking Program, Strength Program, Cardio Program, Stretch/Recovery Program, Recreation, Thermal Walk, and Core Lectures— and run from 7:00 AM to after dinner time. Each morning, I started my day with a 45-minute sunrise beach walk. My digital images reveal that each day's beginning was a unique and calming experience.

A van transported participants to a public beach that was about 1 1/2 miles away. To gain access to the beach, I walked through the grounds of the Sonesta Resort Hilton Head Island. Before the pandemic, Ira and I had been media guests at this property. A few tears formed as I remembered our tropical rainstorm trip. Even though it had been several years since our visit, I felt an inexplicable connection to this place.

To maximize my beach time, I rented a bicycle and helmet for my weeklong stay. At least once a day, I bicycled back to the beach where it was possible to ride for miles on the compressed sand or simply sit and watch the ocean. The ebb and flow of the tide, along with the inherent beauty of Hilton Head Island satisfied my desire to be in a coastal environment. For the first time since Ira's death, I was able to find joy every day at the beach.

In addition to taking regular fitness classes, I expanded my horizons by doing things that I had never done before. One morning, I stayed at the beach for a Tai Chi class. I also participated in my first pickleball class, a barre class, and a dance class and worked very hard to learn the proper technique of hula hooping. Since I enjoy water aerobics, I was in the pool at least once a day. I scurried from my guest room to the pool since the early morning temperatures were in the 50s.



Early Morning bicycling at Hilton Head



Sandy Bornstein Bicycling on beach



Sandy Bornstein Learning Pickleball



Pool

I took two excursions that provided time away from HHH. I joined a small group that strolled around the Sea Pines Forest Preserve, another place that I had previously experienced with Ira. During the walk, we encountered a few American alligators, a native species of South Carolina's wetlands. On an overcast and blustery Saturday, I visited Daufuskie Island, a secluded place, only accessible by a ferry. I learned about the culture of the Gullah people, as well as the famous people who have chosen to reside in this hard-to-reach place.



Encounter with Alligator during Sea Pines Walk

After a week, I felt refreshed and ready to head north to cold weather and snowy conditions. I was sad to say goodbye to the staff and the guests who had made me feel a part of something bigger. At the airport, Steve, the driver of the HHH van, hugged me and called me a "badass." I quickly asked him why he used that descriptor. From his personal experience, he had known widows, including his own mother, who were reluctant for a year or longer to do anything solo in the aftermath of their spouses' death. He was happy that I was using travel to move forward.

Traveling and Grieving

My HHH respite from grief was easygoing and flexible. Since I did not know how I would feel on any day, I'm glad that I had the freedom to personalize my schedule which included frequent trips to the ocean, a couple of side trips, and my ability to select my own classes. I redirected my attention away from the pervasive grieving process by remaining active, having daily opportunities to talk with guests and staff, and spending time enjoying Hilton Head Island's natural beauty and moderate winter temperatures. As a widow, I am grateful that I can follow Ira's motto—*Keep Moving and Live without Regrets*.



Bicycle Path Taken to the Beach



Touring Daufuskie Island



Sunrise