

DREAMSCAPES



TRAVEL AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

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AND BEAUTY

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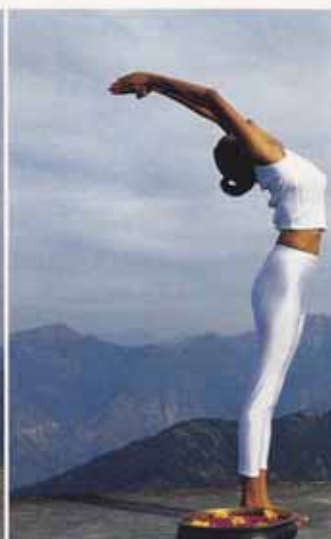
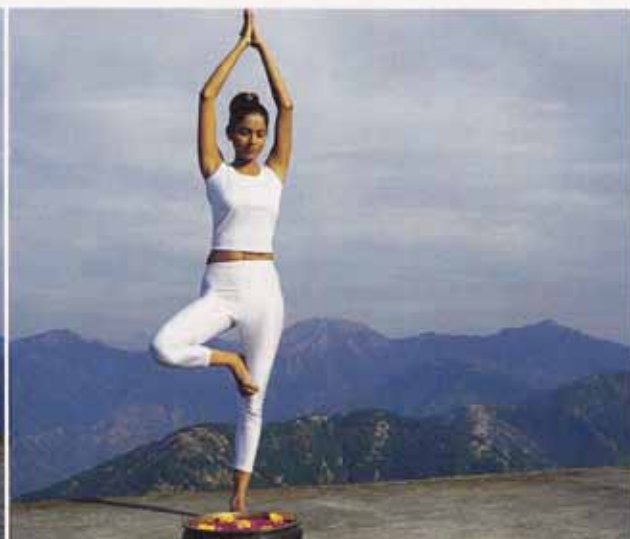
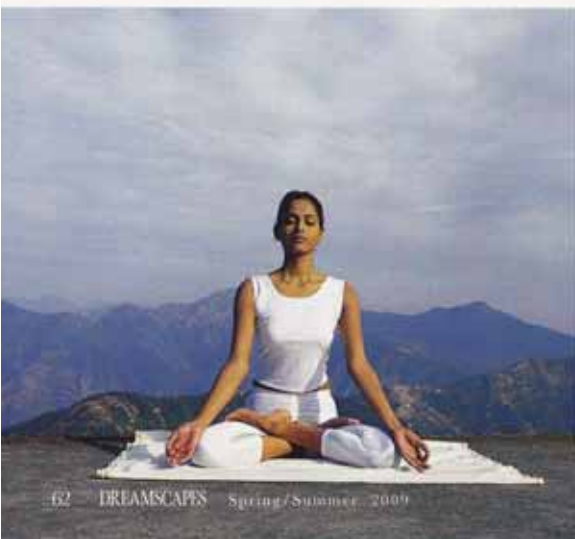


INDIA IS YOGA

LIVE NATURALLY AND WITH SIMPLICITY

BY MARIELLEN WARD

AS I SIT WRITING THIS ON THE BALCONY OF MY ROOM AT THE ANAND PRAKASH YOGA ASHRAM IN RISHIKESH, INDIA, THE MELODIOUS SOUND OF PEOPLE SINGING *KIRTAN* (DEVOTIONAL SONGS AND CHANTS) FLOATS UP FROM THE YOGA HALL BELOW.



From here, I have a breathtaking view of the imposing foothills of the Himalayas and I can feel the invigorating mountain air as it sweeps into this serene valley, through which the jewel-green Ganga (Ganges) River flows. It is easy to see why legend refers to the Himalaya range as *Dev Bhoomi*, land of the gods.

A SPECIAL PLACE

Rishikesh is a small and relatively (by Indian standards) peaceful town that meanders along the narrow valley on both sides of the Ganga, connected by two impressive suspension bridges, Laxman Jhula and Ram Jhula, which are open for pedestrian traffic, bicycles and motorcycles only. Seers—*rishis*—and sages have gathered here since before recorded history to pray, chant and meditate. Indian pilgrims and foreign yoga students alike flock here to stay in one of the town's many ashrams and soak up the devotional vibes. It is often referred to as the yoga capital of the world.

"Yogis have been coming here for a long time, and they created vibrations in their bodies that have gone into the Ganga water, trees, stones," says Yogi Vishvketu (Vishva) who, along with his Canadian-born wife, Chetana Panwar, founded the Anand Prakash Yoga Ashram in Rishikesh two years ago. "People who come here from all over the world feel it instantly. They experience immediate healing and they change on all levels: mental, physical, emotional and spiritual."

To Vishva, who has trained since the age of eight to become a yogi and holds a PhD in yoga from the university in nearby Haridwar, this is one of the main reasons why yoga students are drawn to Rishikesh. The other is the opportunity to be exposed to the whole philosophy of yoga. "Our intention in creating this ashram is to give westerners a safe, clean environment in India to experience both the beautiful, magical energy of Rishikesh and to heal themselves by following the Indian yogic system. We chant, perform rituals, sing *kirtan*, observe the yogic diet and lifestyle and give people the whole picture of yoga."

Personally, the highlight of staying at Anand Prakash is the 6 a.m. yoga class with Vishva in the rooftop yoga hall. As we move, chant and meditate under the guidance of this bliss-master (Vishva is the happiest person I have ever met!), the sun rises from behind the mountains and bathes the room in a golden glow.

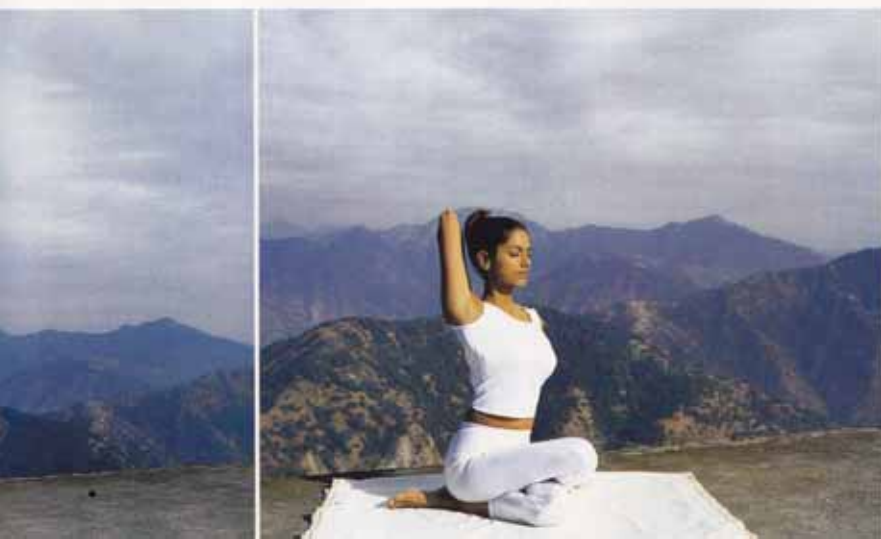
A WAY OF LIFE

The first time I visited Aurovalley Ashram, about 10 kilometres south of Rishikesh, I lay down soon after arriving and fell into the most restful sleep of my life. I felt the profoundly peaceful energy of this garden ashram almost immediately and knew it was my spiritual home.

Several hand-painted signs on the ashram grounds proclaim, "All life is yoga." Reduced to its essence, this is the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, one of the great Indian thinkers of the 20th century. Aurovalley was founded 30 years ago by Swami Brahmdev (Swamiji), a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's teachings. It is a garden ashram, surrounded immediately by meadows and, in the distance, by the mist-covered hills of Rajaji National Park. Nature is ever-present at Aurovalley in the form of fragrant tropical flowers, fluttering butterflies, colourful songbirds, fruit-laden trees, gardens and glorious sunsets. Regular visitors extol the ashram's healing benefits.

Swamiji explains there are two conceptions of yoga. The one that is popular in the West is that yoga is something you *do*. According to Swamiji, however, "Yoga is established in your understanding and attitude; it is a way of life. Yoga is living with a yogic attitude—naturally and with simplicity. When that attitude is born, you are a yogi, no matter where you are."

Swamiji doesn't lecture or teach. Every day he sits outside the ashram library building, under a mango tree, and people gather to ask questions. Does one need to go to India to learn to be a yogi? "If you want to buy vegetables where will you go?" he answers, with lightness and a twinkle in his eye. "India is a university for the world to understand and collect more information on this subject."



opposite, top: In Anand Prakash Ashram, students are encouraged to practise all aspects of yoga as well as contemplate various traditions in yoga philosophy. Mariellen Ward

left: The heart of any yoga practice is the performance of yoga poses (called *asanas*), each of which offers specific physical and mental benefits. India Tourism



PEACEFUL OASES

The International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers is a non-profit organization founded by Swami Vishnu-devananda. He established the first Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center in Montréal, Canada, in 1959 and there are now close to 80 Sivananda ashrams and yoga centres throughout the world. Mani Chaitanya, director of the Sivananda centre in New Delhi, is a tall, slim, soft-spoken man who chooses his words very carefully. The Sivananda centre is an oasis of calm in a very hectic city, and it is where I practise yoga when I am in New Delhi.

"Yoga practitioners are naturally curious to discover the roots of yoga," he says. "In India, people can discover a spiritual way of understanding life. They can experience a new lifestyle and incorporate it into their own practice."

Mani explains that Sivananda offers westerners a systematic method for learning the traditional yogic lifestyle and balancing it with the demands of modern life. "It's a unique structure that is easy and effective to practise in daily life. You can learn to manage a spiritual life that doesn't take you away from where you are."

Sivananda is a worldwide network, a gateway to yoga for westerners, and the same method is followed in all locations. One of its

main attractions is that the ashrams are located in peaceful places, away from city life. The Neyyar Dam location in Kerala, south India, for example, is set in a lush tropical paradise surrounded by sacred mountains. The ashram offers yoga holidays as well as various levels of teacher training programs.

People come from all over the world to study and practise yoga in India. And while there are countless methods and styles, teachers and ashrams, they are all streams leading to and from the same ocean of yogic wisdom.

Navjeet Kaur Mackie is a yoga teacher from Mississauga, currently living in Nova Scotia. She studied yoga in North America before heading off to India in 2007 to deepen her practice and understanding of this ancient tradition.

"India is yoga," Navjeet says. "India is where I found the very essence of yoga, and discovered that yoga is not only a practice on the mat, but a way of life. Although yoga is everywhere in India, Rishikesh is where I practise my physical yoga the most. The feeling that you get when you visit Rishikesh is one of peace and serenity, yet still infused with the typical Indian charm. I recommend India to anyone who is exploring the yoga path." ■

The Ganga (Ganges) is known as a spiritual centre because the people of India rely on the river for most life functions.

Mariellen Ward

HOW TO VISIT

For more information, visit or call:
India Tourism: incredibleindia.org;
416-962-3787/3788

Anand Prakash Yoga Ashram,
Rishikesh: anandprakashashram.com

International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers: sivananda.org
Begin your journey at home with *India: A Cultural Journey*, published by Putumayo World Culture, and its companion CD entitled *Putumayo Presents India*, a collection of musical masala featuring mesmerizing vocals and gentle beats (putumayo.com).