



# Yoga School Drop In

BY LISA KIRCHNER

When I signed up for the yoga teacher-training programme at Brahmani Yoga in Goa, India, I had only the vaguest sense of what I was getting myself into. It was an escape route from a failed marriage and a life I wanted to leave behind, the life of a single person in Doha that – much to my own shock – I'd found myself enjoying. So after my initial desperate research into the programme, I turned my attention fully to creating a seamless transition for my company, packing up the old life and paring down for the new one. Yes I would be trading in my three-bedroom, four-bathroom villa for a dingy room with a fan, my Audi A8 for a rented Honda Activa scooter, my work suits for Lycra gym gear, but also my demanding job for yoga classes. It seemed easy enough.

It's worth mentioning that at 27, I joined the Peace Corps, an American programme that sends volunteers to poor countries and requires subsistence living, so purging the detritus of a Western life was not entirely foreign

to me. It's also worth mentioning I turned 40 a month before this course began, which meant I could have given birth to some of my classmates. On some days I felt as if I had.

The literature advised giving yourself a good two weeks to decompress and mentally prepare, more if you were leaving behind a stressful situation. Naturally, I gave it a weekend. Being a good Doha refugee, I used that time to get myself a mobile phone and a vehicle (the Honda Activa). I found the yoga shala where classes were to be held but didn't explore much beyond that, thinking there would be plenty of time to discover Anjuna (the Goan beach town where Brahmani is located) and beyond over the next two months. Wrong.

The sample schedule didn't look so bad, 7:30 a.m. starts, late for yogis, ending at 7 p.m. An eight and a half hour day if you subtract the three-hour lunch break. Nothing. Except it turned out we met six days a week, until about the third week, when we kicked it up to seven. We did an hour

and a half to two hours of Astanga yoga on those six days, then either participated in or assisted in another practice.

Then we'd spend three hours on the cement floor of the shala taking notes on anatomy, or postures or adjustments, only to be followed up by another couple of hours sitting on that same cement floor trying to meditate. At night I had to force myself to get up and then eat food. The little sleep I did get – have I mentioned the symphonic, nocturnal menagerie of dogs and chickens and goats and cows – did not make up for the constant, gnawing hunger.

That aside, the 8-week course was brilliantly put together by long-time teacher and owner of Brahmani Yoga, Julie Martin. It included not only the physical and mental aspects of what it takes to make a living teaching yoga, but also the spiritual elements that inform the practice and can inform a lifetime. It was the farthest thing from easy and yet it was designed to ensure we all succeeded. The following is an account of some of the trials and tribulations I experienced on the course.

## WEEK ONE:

Three times a week we have a discourse, which entails bringing the entire group together around a table to discuss any issues or complaints or comments we might have. It's day one. I've looked at the schedule; I have to know.

"Do you lose many people on this course?"

I get a blank stare from Julie.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do many people drop out?"

In fact my question was more along the lines of how many people actually succeeded in getting certificates.

"I've never had anybody drop out," Julie said with an air of certitude that let me know she wasn't about to have anybody start dropping out now.

## WEEK TWO:

I move into the Big Brother compound. "Big Brother" is the only slightly ironic name for the house where a number of the yogis are living. Though owned by a local, the house is furnished and maintained by some of the regular yoga teachers. It has special features, like a TV, a water filter and a washing machine, for which they take a cut of the rent. I feel it's a dubious honour to have been invited in, because now I am inside the fishbowl, despite the fact that I'm not actually in the Big Brother house. That was full by the time I was ready to find more permanent accommodation, so I moved into the mother-in-law unit on the same grounds. Thanks to sharing kitchen facilities with them, I got to know Nathan and Anna. Nathan and Anna live in yet another house on the compound, a two-unit space with a little deck and an attached kitchen. They did the teacher training course last year, and Anna is back to assist with the teacher training students and Nathan is taking massage and meditation courses in addition to teaching. I fell in love with Anna when she called me a lazy trollop and Nathan when he dubbed the Tibetan groundskeeper, Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon.

Owing to circumstances far beyond my control, I had two bike

accidents yesterday. These occurred between maybe 7 and 8 p.m. on Sunday night, the night we had a party at Big Brother. If I had my druthers I would have just gone to bed to lick my wounds, but I had a visitor and the party featured entertainment, which meant I didn't have to. By 7.30 a.m. the following morning, a woman I'd not seen and who lived nowhere near me or the scene of either incident, says to me, "Oh, I heard you had two bike accidents yesterday." That is one small aquatic world.

The entertainment deserves a nod. Linda was a 26-year-old Astangi who had trained with Chinese circus gymnasts. For her, our course was child's play. Before starting her days in China, she spent an hour doing leg splits up the wall. Then she'd change sides. She and her boyfriend, Xander, performed at most of our parties throughout the training, he offering up his beatbox sound, she her poi. This culminated, at the end of the course, with a performance at Dunes in Arambol. We gathered around, digging our toes in the sand, the night sky sparkling overhead, to watch multiple fire shows and a performance that included Xander's beatbox along with traditional Indian musicians on flute and sitar. Their reputation had so grown in Goa that by the end of the show it was a whole "we are the world" scene, with artists packing the stage on everything from didgeridoo to bongos.

## WEEK THREE:

I am 40. I have been sitting on cement floors for a minimum of three hours a day for 12 of the last

14 days, not including my hour and a half long practice. I don't think I can make it. I am exhausted and starving all of the time. I have a horrific sinus infection that is making my already tortured breathing more torturous. Nathan advised I should patent the upside down nose blowing trick I'd demonstrated in self practice before Sri Pattabi Jois got a hold of it. Just remember you read it here first. Get into prasaritta position, arms extended with your feet spread out to the width of your elbows, legs straight.

Hinge at the hips taking the crown of the head to the floor and causing all the fluid in your nasal cavity to shift. Grab tissue, close one nostril and exhale through the other into the tissue.

Warning: it's extremely loud. Not eager to repeat the performance myself, I go on antibiotics.

## WEEK FOUR:

Anatomy. We read about archetypes. We spent Sunday learning how to read a deck of archetype cards and Monday learning how to read a horoscope wheel. Nutty as this coursework is, I believe it is good training for dealing with future clientele. Besides, the teacher convinced me of her genius right off the bat.

I was hoping to show off a picture of the massive burn I gave myself pouring hot water from a kettle, except that thanks to Jo Avison's advice-raw honey-it healed almost overnight. Mind you this is after a Western surgeon looked at my hand and laughed when I told him it didn't hurt terribly, saying, "That's because

you've burnt off the nerve endings!"

Burns, according to the absurdly self-determinist Bodymind that we read as homework, are about anger. Perhaps I should bathe in raw honey. At the very least Nathan and I plan to institute weekly honey facials.

## WEEK FIVE:

I may have discovered the key to actually completing this course, and I know it will horrify most yogis, but here you have it: meat.

Up to now I've been on a vegetarian diet, mostly because the restaurants we frequent serve fabulous veg cuisine, exclusively. I didn't long for meat, but I found myself waning through each and every day. During the 5.30 p.m. to 7 p.m. pranayama, I would fantasise about what to have for dinner, not that those fantasies even involved meat.

This discovery came about by accident.

One day I ate nothing at all because the antibiotics had left me too nauseous to even contemplate food. The next day the lovely Debra, a ringer for Angelina Jolie, asked if I'd like to go get a burger. A beef burger. In India. I didn't even want one and actually thought I'd get something else, but the subversive nature of the offer made it one I could not refuse. As you can guess, I got a burger. It changed everything.

That night I got through my first pranayama without nearly passing out. I had more energy the next day, too. To my way of thinking this complies with one of the core elements of yoga, ahimsa, compassion for all living things. Usually taken as a mandate for vegetarianism, in

this case I am regarding myself as a creature in need of compassion.

Not feeling totally depleted day after day is a compassionate act toward myself. Emil Wendel, our yoga philosophy teacher, urges us not to give up anything. Not to fight. He tells us that in time, as we become more in tune with the divine essence in everything, ahimsa will result. In the meantime, I finished my antibiotics.

## WEEK SIX:

I am at the butt end of week six on this course and worried that I am now a worse yoga teacher than I was before I started. The training includes sessions called "talk throughs," where we demonstrate postures and adjustments as if we're teaching them. I am so busy trying to say the script without making a wise crack that I can scarcely keep my concentration. Forget about getting left and right straight; hard enough for me generally, Julie wants us to mirror the poses.

Then again, we've just had three solid weeks without a day off. Yesterday we went from 6 a.m. until 8 p.m. It's a wonder there hasn't been a good girl fight. Of course the day is not over yet. It's lunch break, 12.38 p.m., and I'm contemplating the Internet cafe before yoga philosophy from 3 to 6. Tomorrow is Sunday, our first full day with nothing on the schedule in three weeks.

Is that a little baby scorpion I see over in the corner of the patio?

I think it is. Or it could be a humongous ant. I'm just going to do the yogic thing and observe, I can hardly move anyway.

Tonight is the night market in

Arpora. The first time I went I didn't realise it was a dress up occasion. It is the place to see and be seen on a Saturday night, even with the Al Qaeda threats. Half the people vacationing here are Israelis fresh from completing their military service. It's how they have such tight bodies and seem to do nothing but enormous amounts of drugs all day long. What I want from there is some flesh of chicken. Mmm.

## WEEK SEVEN:

There is light at the end of the tunnel. Though I felt fairly certain by the fourth week I would pull this off, it's not until now that I'm letting my laziness shine through. I do half a practice one morning.

Tomorrow I plan to skip the 6 a.m. pranayama session – oh how I long for those easy, 12-hour days from the beginning of the course-so I can enjoy the bhajans that will start at 7 p.m.

Even if in the midst of singing these traditional Indian songs I sometimes wonder, 'My God, what would my friends from home think if they could see me now?'

I thoroughly enjoy sitting around with my new friends singing and making noise with any of the instruments on hand. Xander will be on harmonium.

Hare Krishna.

## WEEK EIGHT:

I was pulled over by one of Anjuna's infamous police. Policing in Anjuna is a hotly contested job because it entails much baksheesh from pulling

over and fining the hordes of tourists. I actually had the appropriate license and paperwork, but who wants to be bothered with the stopping and talking and head wiggling? My main trick was to blow right past them but it was Wednesday, market day. Traffic was slow and the man in the brown uniform stepped right in front of me. He disputed the validity of my international driver's license in an effort to relieve me of some of my rupees. But these are the right papers, I protested meekly, worried about making a scene in front of my passenger and classmate, Sara.

"That's better than what you're asking for," she proclaimed loudly.

"You're wrong."

I beamed. I hadn't felt that kind of support from my partner, but here it was from my friend.

Even better, she agreed to my getaway plan whereby I drove off and then picked her up further down the road; a mate and an accomplice.

In these small but consistent ways I was cared for.

Ultimately my success is a tribute to the 10 other women on the course and the remarkable teachers at Brahmani, all of whom were serious enough about yoga to take a two-month pause out of their lives during the year-end holiday season.

I am proud to have earned a certificate but question how much I've actually learned.

What I've really discovered is how much I don't know. Emil has imparted one lasting bit of knowledge.

While widely interpreted by its literal meaning, "to yoke," yoga is in fact about freedom. Despite the haphazard way I came to this course, I could not have ordered up a better soul remedy 🙏

*The author is a former resident of Doha.*