

Down, Downward Dog!

An intrepid reporter checks out Santa Fe's yoga scene.

BY MAYA SINHA

Being half East Indian, I always thought I'd have a natural talent for yoga. No one in my family ever practiced yoga, but we did burn incense and eat a lot of lentils, both of which seemed like a head start. One of my uncles is named Aum (often spelled Om), yoga's most sacred syllable. Give me a rubber mat, I thought secretly, and I'll show them. I'll show them all!

Sadly, neither my uncle's name nor my passing acquaintance with the chickpea made a difference when I recently sampled a handful of Santa Fe yoga classes. Instead of serenely guiding my prana through my chakras, I found myself making mental to-do lists and idly wondering what was happening on *Ally McBeal*. I was, in short, a yoga retard—the type for whom the rivers of the arms simply did not flow into the ocean of the heart.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised. Although the beginning classes I took were designed to be accessible, one can't just pick up yoga in a day or two, like rollerblading. Developed thousands of years ago in India, yoga is considered a divine science of how to live, encompassing body, mind and spirit. Although there are many different kinds of yoga, all involve moving through postures (asanas), guiding the breath (prana) and meditating to achieve both physical benefits and a reunion (yoga means "joining") of the individual consciousness and the infinite.

Although I impressed no one with my yoga prowess, the following classes made me want to learn more.

YOGASOURCE

Rain is pouring down outside the tall, curtained windows of the studio as we arrange our rubber mats on the floor—34 in all, packed in like so many enlightenment-seeking sardines. Tias Little, the studio's owner and tonight's instructor, may be the reason for the crowd. Along with his wife, Surya, Little—who looks like a young and guileless Oliver North—paces the room, droning instructions in a reassuring sort of way: "Innnnnhale nnnnnnn Nexhale nnnnn."

He takes us through a series of flowing postures in a style of yoga called Vinyasa. Folded at the

waist, palms on the floor and torso suspended midair, I find myself disinclined to make friends with the Downward Dog. But I like the Tree, in which one stands with one foot pressed into the other thigh, arms lifted upwards and "soft eyes" gazing at the opposite wall. After a series of floor stretches, we rest comfortably on wooden blocks placed under our lower backs. Little periodically stops by to adjust my splayed and ridiculous form into something that feels surprisingly good. At the end, he reads a poem by Roethke as the smell of incense wafts over the studio. A relaxing—if crowded—way to spend an hour and a half.

WHITE IRIS YOGA

Photos of Indian yogis in gravity-defying poses are the first clue that Gail Ackerman's sunlit studio, attached to her home north of Agua Fria Street, is no place for yoga slackers. "These poses are designed to challenge you, physically and psychologically," explains Ackerman, a freckled, blue-eyed woman who combines warmth with the no-nonsense demeanor of a coach.

Ackerman teaches a kind of yoga called Iyengar, which emphasizes maintaining very precise form in each pose in order to strengthen the muscles and develop a sense of harmony and balance. Anyone with a perfectionist streak will feel exhilaration when Ackerman comes by, frowns, and tugs your big toe a millimeter to the left.

There are plenty of fun poses, including one akin to being frozen in the first half of a cartwheel: one foot on the floor, one in the air, one arm extended soaringly overhead. Another pose involves resting face down on one's forearms and kicking your legs up, over your head, so both feet rest against the wall. A resounding thud on the adjacent mat dissuades me from attempting this one.

And the Downward Dog? Forget it. My back is swayed, my feet are wrong, my hips are all over the place. Clearly, this Dog—and Iyengar—could teach me a thing or two.

SANTA FE COMMUNITY YOGA CENTER

Still sore from Iyengar, I'm glad this class begins with sitting cross-legged and chanting, the

DAVID REICHER



Carin Trainer of Yoga Moves exemplifies balance and flexibility.

chant being a strangely catchy little number that goes: "Bolo-rahm, bolo-rahm, bolo rahm rahm rahm!" I feel like a toddler banging on a pot with a wooden spoon, a feeling that seems to have infected all 14 adults present with a lusty sense of well-being.

It's instructor Michael Hopp's first class since returning from India, and Indian philosophy—or the spiritual aspect of yoga—is a major component of this class. Throughout the morning, Hopp's remarks are as often

about cultivating detachment as they are about, say, turning out one's shoulder.

For me, it's all about the contortion. In a position called The Plow, we lie on our backs, legs over our heads and toes touching the floor. The Cobra and The Fish are simple but effective spinal stretches. The familiar Downward Dog is followed by the upward version, in which everyone else sticks out their tongues and pants, and I smile a foolish, oh-surely-not smile.

A well-taught class for spiritual seekers, though others might find it a bit much.

YOGA MOVES

A terrific beginning class. In this large, bare studio with pale yellow walls and wooden floor, I feel that I am finally moving with surety and grace. Notably, I am also breathing: long, slow, belly-filling breaths that lend my motions a natural rhythm and flow. No doubt I should have been breathing this way in

Downward Dog

all three previous classes, but for instructor Carin Trainer, it's clearly a priority. She begins by asking us five students—that's right, just five—to simply focus on our breathing, hands on our diaphragms. She then times all subsequent poses by counting out eight long breaths.

It's a testament to Trainer's wonderfully low-key style (no droning, chanting or even saying the poses' animal names) that the 90 minutes pass quickly. We move through a series of simple but challenging poses, stretching, twisting and testing the strength of our bodies. We shift into the Downward Dog

so gradually that I'm barely aware I'm dealing with my nemesis. Afterwards, upright and dangerously oxygenated, I experience a

mildly thrilling head rush.

Maybe it's time to tap into my heritage and—whoop!—ow!—ah!—take up yoga for keeps.

Trainer demonstrates that dastardly Downward Dog.



spring
guide

Yoga Different

The following yoga classes are offered in Santa Fe. The price listed is for a single class.

BIKRAM'S YOGA COLLEGE OF INDIA — SANTA FE

1310 Monterey Drive, Ste. D, 955-1515
Yoga in a super-heated studio.
Classes Tuesday-Saturday mornings; Monday-Friday afternoons/evenings. \$13

THE DAHN CENTER FOR HOLISTIC HEALTH

1807 Second St. #34, 820-2211
Classes combine yoga, Tai Chi and meditative breathwork.
Monday-Saturday mornings; Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings. \$19

IYENGAR YOGA WITH DEBORAH BRISTOW

209 W. Houghton St., 995-0123, yogadeb@cybermesa
Bristow studied with founder BKS Iyengar.
Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings; Tuesday and Wednesday evenings. \$20

IYENGAR YOGA WITH CAITLIN MCHUGH

813 Waldo St., 983-1781
Classes for all ages and abilities in a tranquil setting.
Wednesday and Saturday mornings; Monday, Tuesday and Thursday evenings. \$12

KRIYA YOGA WITH COLETTE LOVE

Santa Fe Community Yoga Center, 505-323-2618
Classes Wednesday mornings. \$9/\$7 seniors

SANTA FE COMMUNITY YOGA CENTER

826 Camino De Monte Rey, 820-9363
Eight different classes in various styles of yoga.

Various times, Monday-Saturday. \$11

TANGO USA/STUDIO EAST

332 Camino del Monte Sol, 988-3597
Offers gentle and Kundalini yoga classes.
Monday-Friday and Sunday mornings. \$15

WHITE IRIS YOGA STUDIO

1701 Callejon Emilia, 986-1212
An Iyengar yoga studio established in 1983.
Monday, Wednesday-Saturday mornings; Monday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings. \$14

YOGA 1

83 Placita de Oro, #1, 982-7224
Gentle Iyengar-style yoga.
Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday mornings; Monday-Wednesday evenings. \$10

YOGA AND MEDITATION WITH BARBARA GAGE

546 Harkle Road, 424-0302
Kripalu yoga and meditation.
Monday mornings, Wednesday evenings. \$8

YOGA MOVES

825 Early St., 989-1072, www.yogamoves.com
Eight different yoga classes, plus several classes in performing arts.

Various times, seven days a week. \$13

YOGASOURCE SANTA FE

518 Old Santa Fe Trail, 982-0990, www.yogasource-santafe.com
Nine different classes, including pre- and post-natal yoga.
Various times, seven days a week. \$12

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