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Wellness Travel: Top 13 Culturally Immersive Yoga Retreats From Around The World

Posted by Katie Foote on August 19, 2014 at 2:14 pm

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Most people think of yoga as a turning inward, a solitary practice aimed at developing self-awareness and reflection. People practice yoga to find peace and improve wellness; but ultimately, to feel truly serene, you need to feel united and at home with your environment. Instead of isolating you from your surroundings, these trips connect you with local people, traditions and cultures to help you feel grounded, even in foreign settings. Seek more meaningful encounters than ordinary yoga retreats of personal discovery, as these trips allow you to try something new, broaden your horizons and connect to people with different perspectives.

Join the Balinese in firework displays and excitement before a day of silence to celebrate their new year. Participate in the sacred Incan fire ceremony. Volunteer at a home for abused women and the homeless in Greece… then celebrate all of your blessings by learning Greek dance! With these cultural immersion trips, you will stretch more than your limbs. In fact, you will emerge as a much more well-rounded person by the time you return home.

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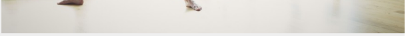

Yoga room in Austin, Texas. Photo courtesy of Travaasa Experiential Resorts.

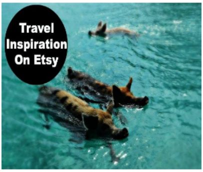
Immerse yourself in the local music and creative culture of Austin, Texas with Travaasa Experiential Resorts, just 25 minutes outside the city, in the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve. You can chose from an extensive schedule of daily yoga programming including detox yoga, yoga for the spine, breathing anatomy lessons, go hatha flow, yoga for strength, aqua yoga and more. When not doing yoga, pique your creative energy with harmonica lessons, a Texas two-step tutorial or head to the on-site stable where cowboys on staff will lead you through an "equine encounter" where to develop self-awareness through interaction with horses. To recover from all this activity, head to the Spa for a signature massages, inspired by a local Austin artist. This includes the "On The Road Again" Willie Nelson massage" with hemp oil and essential oils of orange and patchouli or the rose Janis Joplin massage, which utilizes organic rose oil and tie-dyed sheets. If you want to educate yourself, visit the residential farmer to tour the site's 3.25-acre farm featuring a greenhouse, activity garden and chicken coop, home to more than 100 laying hens. In addition to supplying fresh ingredients, the farm also teaches guests about seeding, harvesting and composting and offers a chicken-keeping course. For more information, click here. All-inclusive rates for an adult start at $475 per night.

Do yoga in Peru's Sacred Valley. Photo courtesy of Vajra Sol Yoga Adventures.

2) Stimulate Your Inner Incan Fire (Cusco, Peru)

Experience Incan traditions as you yoga-your-way through Peru with Vajra Sol Travel. The adventure begins in a lodge with a yoga dome in Peru's Sacred Valley, then moves to Machu Picchu to visit vibrant Quechua markets during. When you are not improving your vinyasa flow and hiking through the Andes, you will participate in a variety of activities that will stretch you culturally. After the sun sets in P'isaq — home of the Incan Temple of the Sun — you will continue your spiritual journey by witnessing the sacred Incan fire ceremony. Next, you will move to Moray to view how the Incans farmed with circular terraces, hike through the saltpans of Salines, and learn how to create national flavors like Pisco Sours and Peruvian ceviche. In addition to broadening your athletic and cultural horizons, you can feel good about traveling with Vajra Sol. Whenever possible, they support local businesses and guides and sustainable travel , including providing eco-friendly lodging to lessen your carbon footprint. Click here for more information. The 8-night retreat rates is approximately $2,250 (shared) or $2,495 (single).

Celebrate Yoga, Culture and the Balinese New Year with Joan Hyman. Photo courtesy of International Yoga.



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3) Make Time For Self-Reflection As You Prepare For Balinese New Year (Bali, Indonesia)

Often, the most exciting time to be in a foreign country is during their holidays. Travel with International Yoga during Balinese New Year to experience Indonesia's deeply routed traditions during one of their most sacred times of year. Locals call this special day "Nyepi" or "The Day of Silence," spent with 24 hours of total quiet. Firecrackers, singing, laughter, parades and general excitement everywhere precedes this quiet holiday. Then, suddenly, the whole island shuts down with no electricity, no driving on the roads and no one working to make time for self-reflection and cleansing. The Bali Institute, Ubud's premiere cultural organization, will introduce you to community leaders and dignitaries to develop a better understanding of this unique culture. Throughout this journey, do yoga and meditate in a pavilion surrounded by lush gardens and a naturally flowing river. To find more information, click here. The week-long retreat and costs approximately $2495 (for a triple room).

Tea for Two Lake Inle Myanmar. Photo courtesy of Luminous Journeys.

4) Pilgrimage And Traveling Meditation Through Myanmar

What better place to learn to meditate than Myanmar, home of Theravadan Buddhism? Join Luminous Journeys on a traveling yoga meditation retreat through a land that contains some of the earth's most spectacular pagodas, payas, stupas and zedis. You will begin and end your days with meditation in unforgettable places, from boutique hotels to the top of a Bagan temple to overlooking Inle Lake. Your sessions will begin with morning stretching and emphasize vipassana yoga, both sitting and walking, along with general awareness of mindfulness meditation. Throughout your trip connect with locals in interesting ways: meditate with local Burmese monks, share a traditional family lunch, fill rice bowls for novice nuns on alms rounds and participate in a religious ceremony. Click here to find out more. This 14-day retreat costs approximately $5795.

Outdoor yoga in Vietnam. Photo courtesy of Pravassa.

5) Learn About Buddhist Philosophy And Live Simply In Vietnam

Cleanse yourself with simple, technology-free living in Vietnam with Pravassa Wellness Travel.

never know what could happen while traveling, so make sure to purchase travel insurance before you go.

You will enjoy a daily practice of a flow asana, meditation and learning about the Buddhist philosophy in a variety of indoor and outdoor settings. You can develop this sense of awareness through a silent lunch at Thich Nhat Hanh's monastery then try your hand at chanting. Bike through rice paddies, swim in the ocean, hike through the jungle, get a custom pair of Vietnamese pants and sip rich Vietnamese coffee as the sun rises. Explore Vietnam's history through war ruins, temples, and tombs. You will also experience what Vietnam tastes like through a cooking class, salt rice feast and local organic, farm-to-table food featuring dishes such as Pho (noodle soup) and Cao Lau (noodles with pork). For more information, click here. The 11-day retreat costs approximately $3,600 per person.

Red Beach Santorini, Greece. Photo courtesy of Learning Journeys.

6) Greek Dance And Giving Back In The Land of Gods (Santorini and Crete, Greece)

Join Learning Journeys on a trip through the mythological islands of Santorini and Crete where you will use yoga and meditation to bring out your inner god or goddess. Tour some of Greece's most famous sights — the Acropolis, the blue and white houses of Santorini, and the Knossos archeological site at Crete — but the most memorable part of Greece is its loud, loving and over-the-top locals. This tour provides the chance to cook with a Greek Yia Yia (grandmother) and make tzatziki sauce, Cretan dakos and loukoumades (Greek donuts). You will empower yourself by giving back to the local community at "Angel's House" which houses, protects and helps abused women, orphans and the homeless. Spend an afternoon helping by painting, working in the gardens and completing other projects as needed, and celebrate the power of human connections by learning a Greek dance. Throughout your journey, there will be daily yoga and meditation sessions so you can harness energy from this beautiful land. Click here for more information. This 9-day retreat costs approximately $2850 per person.

Learn the Blow Dart Hunting Style with Pilchi Natives in Ecuador. Photo Courtesy of La Selva Resort.

7) Blow Dart Hunting With The Pilchi Tribe In Ecuador

Voyage into the Ecuadorian rainforest with a yoga retreat at La Selva Ecolodge & Spa. In addition to a customizable daily yoga practice, this retreat gets you hiking around the rainforest to meet nearby wildlife and indigenous families. Watch a parrot and parakeet feeding at Yasumi National Park, take a nocturnal canoe tour of a lagoon to see nocturnal animals, and fish for pirhanas in the Garzacocha Lake. You will have to return them to the water, though, because La Selva is part of the Rainforest Alliance for sustainable tourism.

In addition to consciously protecting the Amazonian rainforest, the ecolodge has outreach to support the indigenous Pilchi community. They teach them about sustainable and organic farming then serve the local produce at the resort. As a guest, you can visit the community for a meal and learn more about their way of life — and even get a lesson in blow-dart hunting! By the end of the retreat, you will feel good about the growth in your yoga practice, but even better about leaving a positive impact on the surrounding environment and community. Click here for more information. This 5-day retreat costs approximately $1,824 per person.

Let Jeanne guide you on a yoga and cultural journey through North India. Photo courtesy of International Yoga.

8) Explore The Origins of Yoga (Delhi, India)

What better place to enhance your personal yoga practice than India, the birthplace of yoga? Join Jeanne and International Yoga for an immersive trip into the culture of meditation, prayer, practice and learning about the origins of yoga. You will interactively learn about the history of different yogis by visiting sacred sites, practicing rituals, meditating in temples and improving your own Yin and Ashtanga practice in one of the world's most spiritual countries.

You will start your exploration of India's most treasured sights in bustling Delhi where you'll tour the ancient bazaars, sample sumptuous cuisine and take a rickshaw ride though its chaotic streets. You will travel to Agra and feel dwarfed by the glistening Taj Mahal. Then, you'll drive to the desert of Jaipur where you'll see first-hand how local artisans create their wares and crafts. Finally, you will fly to incredible Varanasi, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and the origin of the Ganges. This is a place of pilgrimage for many and you will never forget witnessing all of life's rituals on full display along the banks of the holy river. Each city, you will be joined by local guides for more insider information about each distinctive location. Click here for more information. This 8-day retreat costs approximately $2795 per person.

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Yoga in Marrakesh, Morocco. Photo courtesy of Trip Tribe.

9) Relax On An Ancient Farm Close To Maze-Like Markets (Marrakesh, Morocco)

Join TripTribe and an internationally acclaimed instructor for 5-days in exotic Morocco. You will stay at "La Ferme Berbère", an undeniably charming ancient farm built of natural and living materials such as earth, wood and straw. The compound is located only 25 minutes from the hustle and bustle of the city centre while maintaining a peaceful countryside atmosphere. This retreat includes day trips to Oukaimeden, where you can practice outdoor yoga at the highest ski resort in Africa. For a different side of Morocco descend into Ourika Valley, whose streams and rivers attract locals. Here, you'll have the chance to shop at a variety of markets, taste the exotic flavors of Moroccan cuisine, and take in an ancient culture that still thrives today. Click here for more information. This 5 day retreat starts at $945 per person.

Join an Indonesia Orchestra as part of the Balinese Bliss retreat. Photo courtesy of Sacred Earth Journeys.

10) Join An Indonesian Orchestra In A Balinese Village (Bali, Indonesia)

If you want to go to Bali but can't align your trip with their New Year, consider the Bali Bliss Retreat with Sacred Earth Journeys. Enjoy daily yoga and meditation with yoga instructor Michele Labelle, visits to beautiful beaches, bike rides through the rice paddy fields, a special trip to Les Waterfall, visits to monasteries and temples and a snorkeling excursion to Menjangan Island; however, what makes this trip really special is a day spent visiting your local guide Artayasa's home village of Pacut to experience and learn more about daily life. He is the village master, responsible for organizing cultural events in his village. You will visit an elementary school to weave coconut leaves for a temple offering, experience traditional farming and even gather with local musicians to play Gamelan Angklung (Balinese orchestra). This day culminates in preparing and sharing a delicious lunch with the locals of Artaya's village. Click here for more information. The 10 day program costs approximately $2270 per person.

Open Air Yoga at Jake's Hotel in Treasure Island, Jamaica. Photo courtesy of Verve Yoga.

11) Rediscover Simple Living in Rural Jamaica (Treasure Beach, Jamaica)

Head to the Caribbean and join Verge Yoga for a rejuvenating retreat in Treasure Beach, "a small, rural enclave on Jamaica's undeveloped South Coast where fishing and farming are still common ways of life." Yogis of all levels will participate in two daily sessions that include flow, stationary and yin yoga accompanied by meditation. The natural, non-commercial setting allows you to rest more deeply, see more clearly and gain new insights, especially when you connect with the island community. Retreat-goers can volunteer at local schools or join local fisherman on their morning catch, which they will prepare for you over an open fire. Jake's Hotel makes sure to source all of its food from local farmers and fishermen and you too can supplement your meals with supporting local sellers. Just down a dirt road, you will find a man selling bananas and papayas from the Jamaican mountain along with jerk chicken and peanut porridge he made himself. Verge offers two yoga classes in the morning and two in the late afternoon to accommodate all levels of students. Click here for more information. The 5-day retreat option costs approximately $1300 per person and the winter, 8-day version costs approximately $1925 per person (assuming double occupancy).

Join Chill Expedition for a eco-immersion in Costa Rica. Photo of Chill Expeditions.

12) Eco-Immersion In Costa Rica (Pacuare, Costa Rica)

Join Chill Expeditions for an eco-immersive yoga retreat in Costa Rica. Chill Expeditions believes yoga along the Pacuare in Costa Rica, for example, is much more than anadventure-filled challenge down a scenic river. Native guides will share intimate stories that empower appreciation, like teaching retreat-goers about the river's significance to indigenous communities, how it serves as an energy source to local ecosystems and the world as a whole. Daily yoga practice is thematically integrated with the day's activity –whether it is white water rafting, hiking up a waterfall or spending anafternoon with local school children, every experience is inter-connected and united – just as the root word of yoga suggests. These retreats will create a cohesive, united experience by combining insights from variety of perspectives, activities and practices. Click here for more information. Chill Expeditions Yoga Eco-Immersions range in length and in price, but typically last eight days and $2,275 per person.

Nepal Yoga Homestay. Photo courtesy of Anne H. and Earthbound Expeditions.

13) Growing By Giving Back- Volunteering and Sightseeing in Nepal- Kathmandu, Nepal

Many people come to Nepal for its majestic mountains but stay for its warm, generous people. Additionally, as a spiritually rich place, Nepal is the perfect location to grow your yoga roots. Join Earthbound Expeditions on a journey to meet these hospitable locals, unforgettable landscapes and unusual wildlife. This trip will take you all around Nepal, from Kathmandu's UNESCO-recognized temples, to serene mountain views at Pokhara Lake and a jungle safari in Chitwan National Park. However, the highlight for most guests is three to five days of serving at a local orphanage or teaching English at a nearby school. You will stay in a nice, clean hotel with a daily yoga practice but you will spend these days interacting in a meaningful way with an impoverished Nepalese community. Even though your volunteering project is short-term, you will leave behind a positive impression on the people you generously spend time with. Click here for more information- the 12-day trip costs approximately $797. If you do not want to volunteer but want to connect with local homestays, check out these options from Nepal Yoga Retreat.

Which of the above-mentioned culturally-immersive yoga trips would you love to experience? Please share in the comments below.

-By Katie Foote

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Katie Foote

Katie Foote is a doctoral student who travels the world any chance she can get. Physics trips to India, Taiwan, Brazil and Singapore funded her first international travels and since then, she's been hooked and found ways to travel the world on a graduate student budget (cheap!). She seeks out off-the-beaten-path destinations and tries to authentically experience new places through a local lens. When she's not doing physics or globe-trotting, she likes to swim, do yoga, experiment with multicultural cuisine and activities, where she currently resides in Raleigh, North Carolina. Check out Katie's blog to follow her adventures around the world.

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