

## Yoga in India: A Travelogue

New Delhi at 4am. The routine traffic insanity is momentarily replaced with a single taxi speeding with ease toward the Indira Gandhi International airport. We are on our way home. Fabian had given the driver a very generous tip as Ali was reading the giant board informing us that our flight had been delayed by an hour. Not a big deal. I was exhausted, feeling a little nostalgic, but very ready to get home.

We arrived in India only 17 days earlier. After a brief stay in Delhi's infamous Paharganj district we took an early morning train up to Haridwar. Haridwar is well known in India as one of the three venues for the Kumbha Mela – a religious celebration that regularly draws crowds of over 20 million people. A ½ hour taxi ride later we arrived in the town that would play host to the bulk of our India experience – Rishikesh.

The Beatles had hunkered down in Rishikesh about 40 years ago during their brief sojourn with the founder of Transcendental Meditation, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. During that period in Rishikesh the Beatles wrote almost 50 songs while they stayed in the Maharishi's ashram. There is something enchanting about this town. I am no romantic when it comes to India, believe me. There is no shortage of fake gurus and cosmetic spirituality all over this place, but there is also something very special. The cold, clean water of the Ganges and the brisk Himalayan morning winds seem to keep the place relatively pure.

If you have done some chanting in your yoga classes, you know how the room feels different immediately after doing a few rounds of OMs, right? There is a certain stillness that one only feels after chanting that sacred sound. Well, in Rishikesh it seems there are OMs happening around the clock. Every morning at 5am the boys from the Parmath Niketan (one of Rishikesh's oldest and most well-known ashrams) begin their chanting down by the Ganges. It served as an early wake-up call for me (although I generally fell asleep again before they were finished). There were chants every afternoon coming from a nearby ashram while we were holding our Ayurveda lectures on the rooftop of our hotel. Every class we took started and ended with chanting. There was chanting every evening, again at the Parmath Niketan, during their Ganga Arati ceremony in which people could be seen by little boats that housed a candle that was lit and sent down the river in memoriam of your ancestors. From morning to night, every night, Rishikesh bathes in the sacred sounds of mantras.

Our plan to study with the foremost Iyengar yoga instructor in Rishikesh, Usha Devi, did not go according to plan. Not only was she out of town when we arrived, but the manager of the ashram had failed to sign us up for her very full classes. This resulted in a new plan being slapped together in a matter of hours. In retrospect it worked out very well, because there is no way I would have looked into taking classes on kundalini yoga. I typically think of that sort of

thing as...well, flakey. But as it turned out our instructor, Deepak, was great and the classes were a very interesting combination of asana, meditation, philosophy, and pranayama. To top it off the classes were held on the roof of a yoga center nearby the Ganges so all variety of birds and monkeys were regular visitors to our class. Our hotel had a yoga studio on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor with a young Iyengar instructor who almost immediately endeared himself to our whole group. Suryans is a passionate, demanding teacher who became like an old friend after only a couple of classes. We also had the opportunity to do a yogic cleanse called *Shankh Prakshalan* which entails drinking 2-4 glasses of salty, limey water and repeating a sequence of postures until your bowels begin to move. You then repeat that above procedure until nothing is coming out of you but the same water that is going in. Clean from top to bottom. Yikes. As if that was not gruesome enough, just when you can't handle any more and you "tap out" you have to drink another 2-3 glasses of water and vomit (which we did into a small drain on the roof of our hotel – much to the amusement of the women hanging laundry to dry on the roof of the hotel next door). I lost about 8 pounds that day. And while I suspect that it was a healthy and useful thing to do, I do not suspect I will be repeating the process any time soon.

Our second week required a change in venue, from the bustling alleys of Swarg Ashram (the oldest area of Rishikesh) to the serenity of Tapovan (the newest area of Rishikesh) and the Anand Prakash Ashram. The Anand Prakash was founded by Yogi Vishviketu and his Canadian wife, Chetana. We were there to study yoga therapy with my friend and teacher Dr. Nivedita Pingle. Nivedita is a charming and talented yoga therapist with a knack for explaining things in a way that you can not only understand but remember. Ashram life is a bit of a drag, actually. The food is bland, you are not supposed to talk before breakfast, and everyone seems a little premeditated in their state of yogic bliss – but the place was beautiful, clean, and quiet. A perfect venue for our classes with Nivedita.

For our last couple of days in India we decided to head a little higher up into the Himalayas to a town called Mussoorie. From the valley floor below, it looks as though a giant angrily flung a small city on to the side of a mountain – and it stuck. Situated at 6000 feet above sea level, Mussoorie is a honeymoon destination for India's growing middle class. On clear days you get a spectacular view of the Himalayan mountain range. We were treated to some breath-taking views on our first morning there. The drive up and down the mountainside was nowhere near and hair-raising as I expected. In fact I was largely relaxed for the whole trip (before we saw the bus which had gone off the side of the road and was perched precariously on a tree just above a 50 foot drop to certain death – a note to all readers: never take a bus in the mountains in India). After a short day and half in Mussoorie it was time to head back to Delhi for our flight back home.

The trip was like India always seems to be – impossibly beautiful and terrifying. Confusing and intoxicating. One moment you are smelling jasmine and coriander. The very next, garbage and urine. One moment you are scared for your life. The very next, you are having the time of your life.