

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

LIFE TRAVEL OFF DUTY TRAVEL

## The New Flexibility of Yoga Getaways

Yoga vacations—more self-indulgent than you'd think—are taking off around the globe. One lazy yogi heads to Italy for a low-stress, no-hassle trip. Plus: How to find the right yoga retreat and 6 other fulfilled fitness vacations

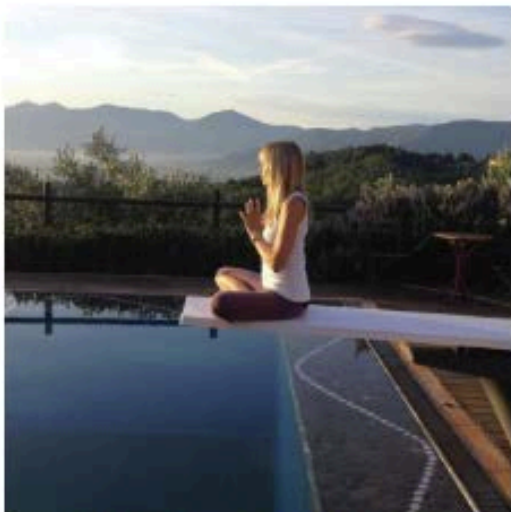


PHOTO: STEVE THOMAS

By MARGOT DOUGHERTY

**YOGA RETREATS** are point-and-shoot vacations: Pick a destination, find an all-inclusive retreat, book your flight. No need to worry about an itinerary or hotels. Wardrobe? Loosefitting. If you're a lazy planner (hand raised), like to travel alone without being alone (hand still up), and want a holiday that's more likely to renew than exhaust you, a yoga escape is ideal.

No longer the province of ascetics who consider binge-drinking wheatgrass shots a bracing good time, yoga has become a \$16 billion-a-year business in the U.S., according to a 2016 Yoga Journal/Yoga Alliance survey. Yoginis (women) make up 72% of the 36.7 million mat-toters, but the number of men sinking into warrior pose, upward of 10 million, has more than doubled since 2012. Enterprising folk have found myriad ways to monetize the movement, from mat sanitizers and pricey tights to private yoga classes in hotels. And yoga vacations around the globe have exploded, targeting everyone from stiff-as-a-board beginners to Cirque-du-Soleil-bendy types with decades of experience. The retreat business — active from Iceland to Jamaica, Bhutan to Hawaii — has risen to meet this newly hatched and happy-to-spend consumer for whom sun salutations are just part of the draw. “It’s about being in an amazing location and pivoting from the yoga experience to sightseeing,” said Rosanna McCollough, CEO of YogaWorks, whose 50 U.S. studios draw 250,000 yogis each month, many of them shelling out \$6,500 for a retreat with one of their favorite teachers. “Yoga helps you disconnect,” said Christine Boyle, a Seattle marketing executive who tries to go on a yoga retreat every year and has hit India, Costa Rica and Paris (twice). “And you’re surrounded by people who have the same intent. Most make the effort to put their phones on airplane mode and not be as connected to technology.”



LOTUS IN LUCCA | At Il Borghino, a villa in Tuscany that hosts yoga retreats. PHOTO:DOROTHY PRICE/SANTOSHA YOGA RETREAT

My first yoga getaway was in the 1990s, when I went to Mysore, India, to study with the late Pattabhi Jois, the father of Ashtanga, a specific form of vinyasa (flow yoga). It was an up-before-dawn, bare-bones affair held in the dimly lit basement of Mr. Jois’s home. Two decades later, yoga retreats come enriched with every activity imaginable: bourbon, knitting and yoga in West Virginia; horses and yoga in Colorado; yoga and sailing in Turkey. One operator offers naked yoga at an undisclosed beach (No thanks, namaste).

A few months ago, looking for a no-hassle getaway, I checked out the site of Micheline Berry, a teacher whose classes I’d been attending for years. While Ms. Berry, owner of Inhale yoga studio in Venice, Calif., offered several tempting retreats, I zeroed in on “Spell of the

Sensuous: Yoga + Art + Gastronomia in Italy.” Translation: a week at [Il Borghino](#), a villa above the medieval city of Lucca (10 miles from Pisa) with a yoga class or two a day, home-cooked food and forays into Lucca and nearby towns. “I promise the Chianti will be flowing from lunch on,” said Ms. Berry, a Buddhist who observes the concept of moderation rather than deprivation.



I found a flight to Pisa and exchanged some dollars for euros, and my planning was complete. I met the other retreaters at the train station in Pisa—there were 14 of us in all, yoga novices to teachers, mid-30s to 60s, from Wales, England, Canada and a swath of the U.S. Some yoga trips, especially those slanted toward eco-adventure, draw equal numbers of men and women, but ours had attracted only one guy. At the station, we piled into vans and wound through olive groves and vineyards to get to Il Borghino, which accommodates up to 20 guests in elegant rooms overlooking trellised hills.

Ms. Berry, with a master's degree from UCLA in Dance as Healing and Therapy, has been leading retreats since the '90s—Big Sur, Brazil, Bulgaria, Jamaica. She sees yoga and travel as natural complements.

"Starting the day in yoga and meditation allows us to be more sensitive travelers and to really connect with the culture," she said. "There's a palpable difference between that and your alarm going off, running downstairs, grabbing coffee and getting in a bus."

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our class with a  
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Soon after arriving at Il Borghino we hit the villa's yoga room, a subterranean space whose long window looks into a mosaic-tiled swimming pool. After an hour or so of postures for the jet lagged—slo-mo twists and stretches—we concluded our class with a deep chavasana (aka, nap), then ascended to a vegetarian buffet flanked by bottles of Vermentino and an easy-drinking red made from nearby grapes. The meals at Il Borghino, prepared by a 72-year-old local caterer, were vegetarian (common on retreats) and included dishes for the gluten-aborrent and as many milks as there are animals and legumes to make it from. Outside the villa, we ate whatever we chose. There's a split in the yoga world about the pros

and cons of flesh-eating but unanimous consent that gluttony is not your friend. Twisting triangles and headstands are unlikely to feel salubrious with a crown of half-digested lamb chops and last call's Martini sloshing in your gut. If your dream of Italy involves oodles of Bolognese and gnocchi, pocket the yoga idea and save it for another time.





The beach at Monterosso al Mare PHOTO: JACKIE ROBBINS

Each day in Lucca came with a game plan. After a 90-minute to two-hour morning yoga session, we'd spend hours exploring: biking atop the city's massive wall and hitting up the local gelato shops ([De Coltelli's](#) scoops—ginger, fig, licorice—are best); passing a day at [Eco del Mare](#), a members-only beach cove with excellent seafood; taking in an [opera dedicated to Puccini](#) (born in Lucca) at Chiesa di San Giovanni, which dates back to the fourth century. In between, we read by the pool, got massages, and shopped. Most challenging, and rewarding, was the Cinque Terre trek. Starting in Monterosso al Mare, the northernmost of the five towns for which Cinque Terre is named, we hiked 2 miles of a rugged coastline in silence, as a yogic contemplation. Along with acute glute awareness, the hike afforded stunning scenery—tree branches polished by centuries of hikers' grips, a sea of mutating blues beyond a slope of Mediterranean vegetation and then a bizarre feline grotto, a cat house built into the cliff. The sole midday resident posed nobly for photos and head pats. Eventually, the trail's narrow dirt path revealed a birds-eye view of Vernazza, a colorful town whose buildings are built into soaring sheets of rock.

At the town beach, a small cove with anchored dinghies, we changed into bathing suits and scrambled over boulders for a swim. Afterward we met up at [Belforte](#), a restaurant which seems to rise from the sea. Our table spanned a natural rock ledge about three stories up, where Ms. Berry was already enjoying an Aperol spritz. "Detox and retox," she noted with a raise of her glass. We feasted: beer, wine, Prosecco and mountains of lobster, shrimp, sardines, and anchovies, a local specialty.

I flashed back to my arrival in Mysore years ago, when Mr. Jois escorted me to his office and, smiling broadly, said: "So. You getted the money?" I could start my classes only when I'd paid, upfront, in cash. A Rolex flashed on his wrist.

Mat by mat, retreat by retreat, the yoga business is getting the money, and a much broader sweep of the globe is getting the yoga, whenever, wherever, and with just the amount of luxe desired.



## The Right Retreat

*Destination, teacher and yoga level and style are key elements of any yoga getaway. Here are a few tips for finding a serenity-filled retreat ideal for you:*



Kamalaya, a wellness resort on Koh Samui island in Thailand, offers group and personalized yoga retreats. PHOTO: KAMALAYA

**Find your match.** Make sure that the level and style of yoga being taught suit your experience. Don't sign up for 6 hours of vinyasa a day at an austere ashram if you've been practicing Iyengar for three weeks and expect dirty Martinis at sundown. If you're a serious yogi, you don't want to wind up at a retreat geared toward newbies. Contact the teacher or organizer if there are any doubts.

**Research the teacher.** Lots of yogis stick to retreats led by their favorite instructors, but if destination is driving your decision, the teacher may be outside your circle. Check out their website, social media and teaching videos to get a sense of their personality, experience and approach. Have they taught retreats in this location before? Do they speak the language of the host country or have any ties to it? ("Yes" is the best answer to all if you want a real culture dive.) The teacher sets the tone for the entire experience; liking/respecting them is paramount.

**Ask around.** The web is an easy way to find a retreat—plug your dream location into a search engine and see what bubbles up. Talking with yoga friends and teachers is great for refining your decision—they may have the dish on retreats you're considering and recommendations for others you don't know about.

**Chill.** Once you've embarked on your retreat, be a good yogi. It's a group experience, and one crab apple can spoil it for everyone. This is time to let go, unplug and think charitable thoughts, even when the person next to you snores like a chain saw straight through chavasana.

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### Bike and Banquet

→ Andy Levine's own "bike, eat, drink, sleep" approach to travel inspired his founding of DuVine two decades ago. Now with nearly 300 tours, from Vermont to Morocco, the luxury bike-tour company emphasizes local access, which means an arduous ride through the Alps (pictured) might be followed by a session with a Tour de France massage therapist or a trip in Italy's Piedmont that includes truffle hunting and home-cooked meals. From \$5,395 for the 6-day Piedmont truffle tour, [duvine.com](http://duvine.com)

