



(re) Give yourself a Yoga treat?

Yoga is massively popular and includes several disciplines such as meditation, breathing exercises, self-study and cleansing techniques known as 'kriyas'. Whilst these are all important and beneficial aspects of yoga, the element of yoga we are most used to in the western hemisphere is the practice of yoga postures, traditionally known as 'asana'.

Thanks to its recent popularity and media coverage we are hearing more and more about the physical side of yoga and it is now very common to have several classes a week on the gym timetable. In addition, more and more studios and teacher training courses as well as retreats are cropping up all the time. The current popularity of yoga can only be a good thing. The more flexible and strong on a



physical level are, the better our brain chemistry is, resulting in the most amazing physical and psychological benefits. These are often reported as feeling more calm and clear minded. Other physical effects include improved sleep, digestion and recovery from injury and illness.

Starting your yoga practice...

So the obvious question is 'why aren't we all doing yoga?' More often than not people do not practice yoga because they literally don't know where to start. There are so many different styles and many classes are described as 'general level', but still require some experience.

I believe the best course of action is to find a beginner's class and if it feels like the correct class for you, stick with it for at least three months. You may well be physically strong or extremely aerobically fit but yoga asana work and move the body in a very different way to regular exercise and learning the basics will take time, dedication and most importantly patience.

Should I retreat?

Another effective way to learn yoga asana is to immerse yourself in a yoga retreat. Yoga retreats are big business right now thanks to increasing demand and there is now a huge choice of venues and yoga styles to choose from. As well as being an enjoyable way to get away from it all whilst staying active, by dedicating a weekend or several days to mainly yoga, you can really achieve a breakthrough in your knowledge of the asanas. All this which will help you when you are back in your regular class. If you feel you would also like to try another activity whilst away, there's also a lot of choice with some retreats now including Pilates, hiking or even surfing on their schedules.

How to choose a retreat:

Like choosing a yoga class, choosing a suitable retreat also requires a bit of shopping around. There are so many teachers and businesses running retreats that as with anything, some are good and some not so good. Remember you are not only investing your money but also your time, so you deserve a fantastic experience. Here's a guide to what you should look for in a retreat.

A suitable teacher

Checkout your prospective teacher's experience and if they are fully qualified. There should be evidence somewhere in the retreat's organisers marketing material to show that the teacher has at least 200 hours of yoga study under his or her belt. Furthermore, yoga teachers that are new to teaching should not be running retreats, as they will not have yet gained the work experience required to deal with a relatively large group of people that they don't know. So check experience too.

Style of yoga:

As mentioned there are many styles of yoga and all are effective in their own way but this doesn't necessarily mean that they are correct for you. So do your research or maybe ask your yoga teacher to recommend a retreat or particular style to you. Iyengar Yoga is a challenging kind of yoga but is also excellent for beginners – it's so instructive with a lot of attention on alignment. Ashtanga, Jivamukti, Sivanada, Anusara and Dynamic styles are all also wonderful, but ensure the teacher is



happy to give guidance to students of your level. Ask what the general level of the retreat is and ask to see the intended schedule so you can see if it has enough scheduled activity for your requirements.

Other factors to lookout for:

Check how long the retreat company has been established for and if they have any testimonials and recommendations on their website. Check what the cost includes and how much extra services are such as transfers, massage and single occupancy room rates. Ask if they have a cancellation policy and if so what is it? If it's non-refundable look into getting travel insurance as you would do so with any other trip or holiday. Also check your travels costs and whether or not guests are collected from the train station or airport.

As you can see there are several factors to think about before you book a yoga retreat, so we have selected several well-established retreats that will meet your needs and deliver a worthwhile experience. All retreats are inclusive of twice-daily classes, food and accommodation and are suitable for beginners up to intermediate levels. Prices are based on two people sharing but single occupancy is also available.

Weekend Retreats in the UK

Sally Parkes Yoga offer twice monthly retreats in Sussex and has been established for seven years. All programmes include Dynamic Yoga and Pilates, as well as more restful Hatha Yoga. With only twelve guests on each weekend, every guest receives proper instruction and all venues are in great areas for walking, running and mountain biking. Easily accessible by car and public transport, retreats are held in Lewes, Arundel and Seaford and are run by teachers with ten-year minimum yoga experience. Costs are from £277pp. www.sallyparkesyoga.com

Five Day Retreats in Morocco

Satvada Retreats run popular five-day retreats in Morocco at two different venues. One is just thirty minutes from Marrakech with stunning Atlas mountain views from Hotel Tigmi. Yoga classes are taken on the roof terrace allowing you to enjoy the scenery and fresh air. Costs from £545pp. All rooms are large and en-suite and your stay can be extended by booking extra nights at the hotel for a discounted rate.

Satvada Retreat's other venue is a selection of luxury boutique Riads just outside the coastal town of Essaouira. The spectacular beaches are widely used for activities including camel trekking to watersports, including kitesurfing and wind-surfing. Costs include airport transfers, an hour's hammam/spa experience and a half-day's cookery excursion. Costs are from £680pp. Both are fantastic retreats for those looking to chill out as well as stretch out. www.satvada-retreats.co.uk

Seven Day Retreat in Spain, Andalusia

Set high up in the Andalusian mountains, this retreat offers a complete getaway from everyday life. The purpose built Hacienda Retreat Centre has a rustic and welcoming feel and offers an infinity swimming pool, large yoga studio, sauna and meditation area. Twice daily yoga and Pilates classes are dynamic, inclusive and fun and are taught by Sally Parkes. With plenty of opportunity to go hiking as well, there is something for everyone. Cost from £699pp. www.sallyparkesyoga.com

