



Yoga practitioners stretch out on a dock, above, overlooking the lake at Feathered Pipe Ranch in Montana. Below, Baron Baptiste, right, scion of two generations of yogis, leads a session.

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Travel

DESTINATIONS, TIPS AND TOURS



WEEKEND ESCAPE Shark!

Protected by a cage, swimmers go eye-to-eye with the fearsome, awesome predators. **L5**

PETER HEMMING

Far from the stresses of home, finding tranquillity at two retreats designed to bring out the best in body and soul.

By SUSAN SPANO / Times Travel Writer

HELENA, Mont.—I love the sound of “om,” the Sanskrit word used in chanting. Voiced in a long exhalation at the beginning of yoga class, it focuses my attention inward and reverberates pleasingly in my mind.

Even though I own a yoga mat, I’m no expert. I can’t even get my heels to the floor in downward-facing dog, one of yoga’s most basic postures. I sometimes cry in dead bug pose. (Teachers say that certain yoga postures, or asanas, release emotions we don’t know we have.) I like the tone and strength yoga brings to my body, the ditsy New Age music, the loose clothes. I even like it when I cry.

So I had no trouble embracing the idea of attending two recent yoga retreats, one at Inner Harmony, atop a 9,300-foot mountain in southwestern Utah, and the other at Feathered Pipe Ranch, tucked into the Rockies near here. These retreat centers, like others in the U.S. and abroad, offer weeklong programs, usually in the summer, taught by some of America’s most distinguished yogis. There are retreat centers for yoga in California, of course. But I wanted to get a little farther away to do what serious yoga stu-

dents, trainee teachers, adventurous novices and dilettantes like me do at such places: sweat and groan through six hours of class daily, eat healthful food, hike the Western wilderness, swim, nap, make brief but intimate friendships and write in a journal.

In a way, yoga retreats are like spas, but with less pampering and more rustic accommodations in cabins, dorms, tents, tepees and yurts. And they’re more challenging than a spa.

“I’m going to wring you out,” Baron Baptiste, the high-powered yoga teacher from Cambridge, Mass., promised at the Feathered Pipe orientation. Then he laughed mischievously.

If this sounds more like masochism than a vacation, imagine yourself after the wringing out. I felt clean, calm and strong at the end of my week at Inner Harmony. After another at Feathered Pipe, I felt tough and ready.

As many as 20 million Americans practice yoga in pursuit of physical or mental fitness, with a little om along the way. “When we do yoga at home, we’re basically trying to reduce stress and negative influences,” said Rod Stryker, the charismatic L.A. yogi who

Please see Yoga, L10



Experiencing emotional release after a Feathered Pipe yoga session, Lisa Miller, seated, gets a hug from fellow student Maria Glover.

Yoga: Western Retreats for Body and Spirit

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taught at Inner Harmony. "But at a retreat, people get a chance to experience the reach of yoga. It's more than just a way to feel good; it's a way to improve the quality of life."

Accomplished Indian yogis who know how to tap into the semi-abstracted state of consciousness that leads to union with the absolute, which is classical yoga's aim, could meditate or hold a pose on a busy Calcutta road. For those less accomplished, yoga can be particularly pleasing and productive when done in a bucolic place like Utah's Wasatch Mountains or the western Rockies of Montana.

The Inner Harmony retreat center sits at the northern threshold of Bryce and Zion canyons, with sweeping panoramas of the Great Basin to the west and rock-faced Brian Head ski resort to the east.

John Epert, a retired food distributor who took up yoga to ease his sciatica, and his wife, Lynne, a yoga instructor, bought the place in 1980. The 70-acre spread had only a cabin with no electricity or plumbing, but they soon found it conducive to yoga getaways with friends and favorite teachers. With the help of 22-year-old daughter Hope, a massage therapist, they opened a full-fledged retreat center in 1996.

Inner Harmony can accommodate 58 guests. The facilities, which still have a woody, work-in-progress look, include a wing of private rooms and another of dormitory-style accommodations, an oak-floored 1,800-square-foot yoga studio, a grand staircase of decks with hot tubs that hang against the mountainside, a unisex bathhouse and an enclave of 12 canvas-covered yurts that look like something out of a Pottery Barn catalog.

I stayed in the last yurt along the wood-chip path. It had a double bed, carpeted floor, armoire, ceiling fan and phone. Epert, an endearing man who is always in the middle of a project, plans to give the yurts Internet access because he thinks people feel secure when



Photos by GARY FRIEDMAN / Los Angeles Times

A yoga devotee exults in the fresh air after emerging from a stiflingly hot hour in the Chippewa-Cree-style sweat lodge at the Feathered Pipe Ranch.

they know they're connected. I felt secure in mine and slept soundly, lulled by the sound of chirping birds, wind in the aspens and the occasional wisp of rain. The meals were gourmet—lofu Dijon, nori-crusted salmon, oyster mushroom bisque and lentil pâté—and it was over such feasts that I got to know my classmates. There were eight men, or yogis, and 35 women, or yoginis, mostly in their 30s and 40s, from as far afield as Little Rock, Ark., and Charleston, S.C., along with me and my friend Sandra Boynton, who had come from the East Coast to deepen her well-established practice and help me with my downward-facing dog.

Though the retreat was billed for all levels, I soon discovered that about half the people were highly advanced, somewhat cliquish yoga teachers who had chosen Stryker as their guru and were attending specifically to study with him. (One even called herself a "yoga retreat junkie.") A dozen or so were intermediate practitioners, shar-

ing and friendly. And there was a handful of beginners, including a middle-aged man from Long Island, N.Y. When I asked him why he'd come, he glowered at his wife and said, "She got me in a weak moment."

Our days started at 7, when those of us still addicted to caffeine ran for the coffee machine before assembling in the yoga studio. There we had an hour of meditation led by Stryker, a handsome former actor in his mid-40s who trained Bette Midler and Drew Barrymore and is married to model Cheryl Tiegs.

In difficult, twisted-up asanas, he is a thing of beauty. He has other gifts too: his clear voice and his way of describing what we were meant to be thinking and feeling as we sat perfectly still for 45 minutes at a stretch in cross-legged lotus posture. Halfway through a meditation session, he would say, "You are calm and incredibly aware."

Please see Yoga, L11



Dinner—in this case, Indian cuisine—is served alfresco at Feathered Pipe Ranch, near Helena, Mont.



Photos by SUSAN SPANO / Los Angeles Times

The Inner Harmony Yoga Retreat boasts sweeping panoramas of the Great Basin to the west and Utah's Brian Head ski resort to the east.

Continued from L10

and for no reason I understood, I actually felt that way.

Breakfast came next, followed by 2½ hours of asana class, with our mats spread in rows on the floor, yoga props such as blocks and straps, water bottles and towels for mopping up the sweat. Stryker's style, which he calls Pure Yoga, is difficult, spiritual and esoteric, involving breathing exercises (for instance, in one nostril and out the other, sometimes to a metronome), chanting and, of course, the postures, from basic child's pose and downward-facing dog to handstands and backbends, some held as long as seven minutes.

Together with the novices (who were clearly in over their heads), I couldn't do much and became so sore that I always took two ibuprofen before asana practice. But I kept trying and eventually started looking forward to classes.

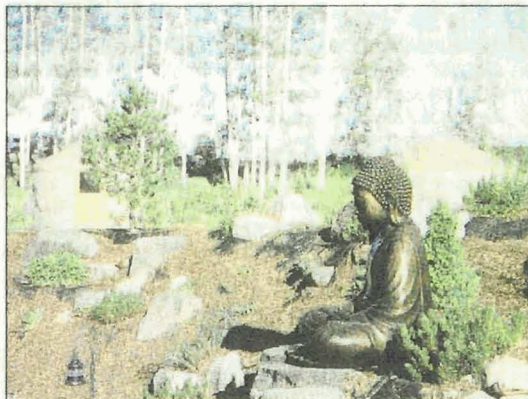
Those who wanted to walked with Epert in the early afternoon. One day we scrapped the schedule and went by bus for a hike in Zion National Park, where we had a veggie burger barbecue. Later we were

reinvigorated in the Virgin River at Pah Tempe Mineral Hot Springs in the town of Hurricane.

Usually there was a second 2½-hour class before dinner, followed by an evening program such as a question-and-answer session with Stryker, hot tubbing, laundering our sweaty yoga togs (the free washer and dryer were crucial) or stargazing.

The true stars of the schedule were our two late-afternoon sessions of yoga *nidra*, a deeply relaxing, healing meditation technique that doesn't require concentration and is seldom practiced in the West. For it, we brought blankets and pillows into the studio, slumber party style, made ourselves comfortable and lay as still as marble effigies for more than an hour while Stryker guided our thoughts. Part of the beauty of yoga *nidra*, Stryker said, is that it works even if you fall asleep and start to snore.

After our last yoga *nidra* practice, I mentioned I was on the way to Feathered Pipe Ranch, and my classmates, familiar with Baptiste's hard-driving, athletically challenging "power yoga boot



Inner Harmony evolved from a rustic 70-acre spread to a well-respected yoga retreat that can accommodate nearly five dozen guests.



Los Angeles Times

camps," were appalled. Stryker raised an eyebrow and said only, "You are going to be a wet noodle."

No wonder I arrived at the 110-acre ranch at the end of Colorado Gulch shaking in my sandals. I'd reserved a tent on a platform in the piney woods, with a lantern, lawn chair and foam pad for my sleeping bag, near the retreat center's five tepees and three yurts. But when I saw it, I decided the tent was too far from the bathhouse and a little buggy. Fortunately, dorm space in the lodge and a room with a private bath connected to the director's cottage were available. (Altogether, the retreat can accommodate about 60 people.) I didn't regret the private room's higher cost.

This wet noodle needed all the comfort she could get.

Which isn't to say I didn't enjoy Feathered Pipe as much as Inner Harmony. This was more diverting, a funky, atmospheric place,

part summer camp, part commune, built around a small artificial lake about 10 miles west of Helena. Here I found an Adirondack-style lodge backed by a broad lawn leading down to the lake. The lodge houses four dorm rooms, a kitchen and a high-ceilinged studio with a huge stone fireplace, perhaps the only yoga space in the world decorated with an elk head.

That's pure India Supera, who is director of the Feathered Pipe Foundation, a nonprofit organization that helps Montana AIDS sufferers, educates refugee Tibetan children and has been sponsoring yoga retreats at the ranch every summer since 1975.

Besides the yoga, highlights of my stay included a stiflingly hot hour in a Chippewa-Cree sweat lodge; a stiff early morning hike to a wide-open meadow high in the Rockies; a session with Edie Resto, a massage therapist and natural healer who used acupuncture and a laser gun to soothe my pulled hamstring; and a campfire chat with Supera about how Feathered Pipe Ranch came to be.

The story can take five minute or five hours, depending on how this runaway hippie girl, Earth mama, Renaissance woman feels. Supera inherited the ranch from a friend she met at an ashram in India. At first, locals called her and her Feathered Pipe friends "the hippies at the end of the gulch." They nearly went bankrupt in 1979, but they persevered and are among the more firmly established yoga retreats in North America.

The daily schedule is like Inner Harmony's, but the hikes are more strenuous, the accommodations more rustic. The food is fresh and plentiful, but not as gourmet. The yoga schedule at Feathered Pipe is more varied. And if you happen to come for a Baptiste boot camp,

Guidebook: Finding a Full Retreat

■ **Getting there:** To get to Inner Harmony, you must fly into Cedar City, Utah. From LAX, connecting service is available on Delta. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$103. For Feathered Pipe, you must fly into Helena, Mont. Connecting service from LAX is on Delta and Alaska. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$324. Both resorts provide shuttle service from the airport.

■ **The retreats:** Inner Harmony Retreat Center, P.O. Box 190086, Brian Head, UT 84719; telephone (435) 677-9923, fax (435) 677-2950, Internet www.Innerharmonyyoga.com. The retreat is about 30 miles north of Cedar City, 185 miles northeast of Las Vegas and 250 miles southwest of Salt Lake City.

Inner Harmony offers weeklong retreats from early June to mid-September.

Accommodations include tents, yurts, dorms and private rooms (with baths). Rates range from \$625 (for a tent) to \$1,295 (for single occupancy of a room).

Feathered Pipe Ranch, P.O. Box 1682, Helena, MT 59624; tel. (406) 442-8196, fax (406) 442-8110, www.featheredpipe.com, has yoga seminars from mid-June to late September. Accommodations are in dorms, tepees, yurts, tents and double rooms (a few have private baths). Rates range from \$995 to

\$1,499 (with a \$200 to \$300 surcharge per person for the doubles).

■ **For more information:** Feathered Pipe Ranch and Inner Harmony are just two of the many yoga retreats in the U.S. and abroad. To find more, consult "Yoga Vacations: A Guide to International Yoga Retreats," by Annalisa Cunningham (John Muir Publications, 1999).

The base price for a retreat usually includes all classes, meals and accommodations. Transportation usually is not included. When you register, a retreat center should provide travel information and directions.

To make sure you'll be comfortable in class, take time to talk with staff members about the teacher and level of the program you're considering.

■ **For information on other sights in the states:** Utah Travel Council, Council Hall/Capitol Hill, 300 N. State St., Salt Lake City, UT 84114; tel. (800) UTAH-FUN (882-4386), (800) 200-1160 or (801) 538-1030, fax (801) 538-1399, Internet www.utah.com.

Travel Montana, P.O. Box 200533, Helena, MT 59620-0533; tel. (800) VISIT-MT (847-4868) or (406) 444-2654, fax (406) 444-1800, www.visitmt.com.

Susan Spano

coffee and dairy products will be absent from your diet.

The group was more East Coast and younger than my group at Inner Harmony because the Cambridge yoga jock seems to attract people who don't yet know how it feels to have sagging breasts and spreading tummies. My boot camp had 33 yoginis and five yogis.

There is something distant and self-contained about Baptiste. But he brought two able assistants, Kate Churchill and Elizabeth Huntsman, who kept watchful eyes on all the students, pushing and correcting experts, helping beginners and occasionally rubbing analgesic oil on the backs of our necks.

Ultimately I had to admire Baptiste, a way-cool, self-assured thirtysomething who sets the style in his classes by wearing baggy gym shorts and a bandanna around his head. Beyond the hipness, Baptiste has the yoga chops. He was raised in San Francisco, scion of two generations of American yogis, and spent time at an

ashram in India as a teenager. Later he taught yoga to football players, the Philadelphia Eagles, gave the Kennedys lessons at Hyannis Port, Mass., and founded a red-hot style of American power yoga involving charged, aerobicly taxing movements.

I almost died in Baptiste's three-hour morning and afternoon classes, which, together with being reborn, is what he promised. While we held a particularly excruciating pose, balanced on our toes, he told dumb jokes. ("What do you call a Filipino yogi? A Manila folder.")

Now that I'm back at home and pursuing my yoga practice more restfully, I think of Stryker and Baptiste, and of Inner Harmony and Feathered Pipe, with affection and gratitude, a feeling that should come at the end of every yoga class. When the practice is done, you put your palms together next to your heart and say "Namaste," a salute that means many things.

To me it means I didn't quite make it to the absolute, but I had a lovely time trying.

A Foundation for Life Can Be Built on a Brush With a Faraway Fascination

Her World

By SUSAN SPANO
TIMES TRAVEL WRITER

India Supera, founder of Feathered Pipe Ranch, a yoga retreat center in western Montana, traveled far to find her direction in life. In 1967, when she was just 21, she set out on the five-year journey and spiritual quest that climaxed at an ashram near Bangalore, India. There she met a woman named Jerry Duncan. When Duncan died in 1972, she left the ranch to India.

India was named by her father, an artist and a student of Indian philosophy. She grew up in Downey, but she was a flower child before the '60s ever began. From the age of 7, she yearned to see the subcontinent and rummaged through used bookshops in downtown L.A. for novels about India and copies of old National Geographic magazines with pictures of such fabled places as Rajasthan,

Ellora and Dehra Dun.

For her, the road to India included such detours as running away to Mexico when she was 17, living in San Francisco at the height of the hippie era, traveling to Europe with a dog called Roachie, and finally setting off on an overland trip to the subcontinent through Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia, with little more than \$200. She hitchhiked, almost died of hepatitis in Pakistan, threw away her passport in northern India (because she wanted to be a citizen of the world, she laughingly explains), washed her clothes in rivers and slept under trees with beggars and lepers.

Her adventures in India were dangerous then and seem even more so now. She says she wouldn't want her children, Crystal, 24, Josh, 19, and Winter, 17, to travel the way she did. Still, she returns to India every other year and owns land in the holy city of Varanasi on the Ganges River. She was at home in Montana when I re-

cently had a long chat with her.

Question: I spent a month in India four years ago and came home shaken by the poverty. Does it seem a hard place to travel to you?

Answer: Part of the hardness of India now is the crowds. It was a gentler country when I traveled there. There were 500 million people; now there's a billion. I would say that something's wrong if a person goes to India and isn't shaken because of the cultural difference. For me there was always a level of culture shock, no matter how many layers I peeled away. It is beyond anything we've been taught, how little people can have and still be happy.

Q: Didn't you travel with your sister Vijaya part of the time?

A: We ran into each other in Almor, a beautiful and then remote place in northern India where there were tigers and cobras. That was a miracle. She'd traveled through Asia to get there, but I didn't know it. I went to the river to brush my teeth and saw her.



GARY FRIEDMAN / Los Angeles Times

Around a campfire, India Supera, center, owner of the Feathered Pipe Ranch in Helena, Mont., tells the story of how she obtained the ranch.

Q: At one point during your spiritual searching in India you vowed to give away everything you had at the end of each day. How did you travel with no money?

A: I just had faith, and it wasn't always pure. Sometimes friends or my sister would pay my way. You will faint, but my sister and I used to sleep on the pavement at the old train station in Delhi. We would wander around and meet people

who'd take us home because we were novelties. They would write letters about us to their friends in other places, asking them to take us in when we arrived. At that time, people were nice, and the hippie movement interested them.

Q: Weren't you hassled by men?
A: I was thin and androgynous-looking and wore Indian clothes. I learned how to call men who bothered me "sons of dogs." And I al-

ways felt safe in the crowd in India.

Q: You lived for 2½ years at the ashram of the holy man Sri Sathya Sai Baba. What was that like?

A: I worked in the hospital there and learned natural healing from Sai Baba. The ashram has gotten fancy now, but 30 years ago, we slept outside or on the roof and cooked our own food. We did yoga and meditated. It was like heaven.

Q: In all that time in India, did you ever do any sightseeing?

A: I saw the Taj Mahal, the caves at Ellora, the temples at Khajuraho. I lived for quite a few months on a houseboat in Varanasi. But I visited these places as a religious seeker. At the time, there must have been 30 or 40 of us who wandered around India like that.

My daughter Crystal travels by herself a lot, meeting people and staying with them. In some small countries where there's no TV, the source of so many bad ideas, you can still travel the way I did. But I don't know if I could do it again.

Q: What did you get from your travels?

A: They taught me not to be afraid and gave me my work here at the ranch. I want to live my life in such a way that, when I die, any religion would have me. That's my motto in the end.