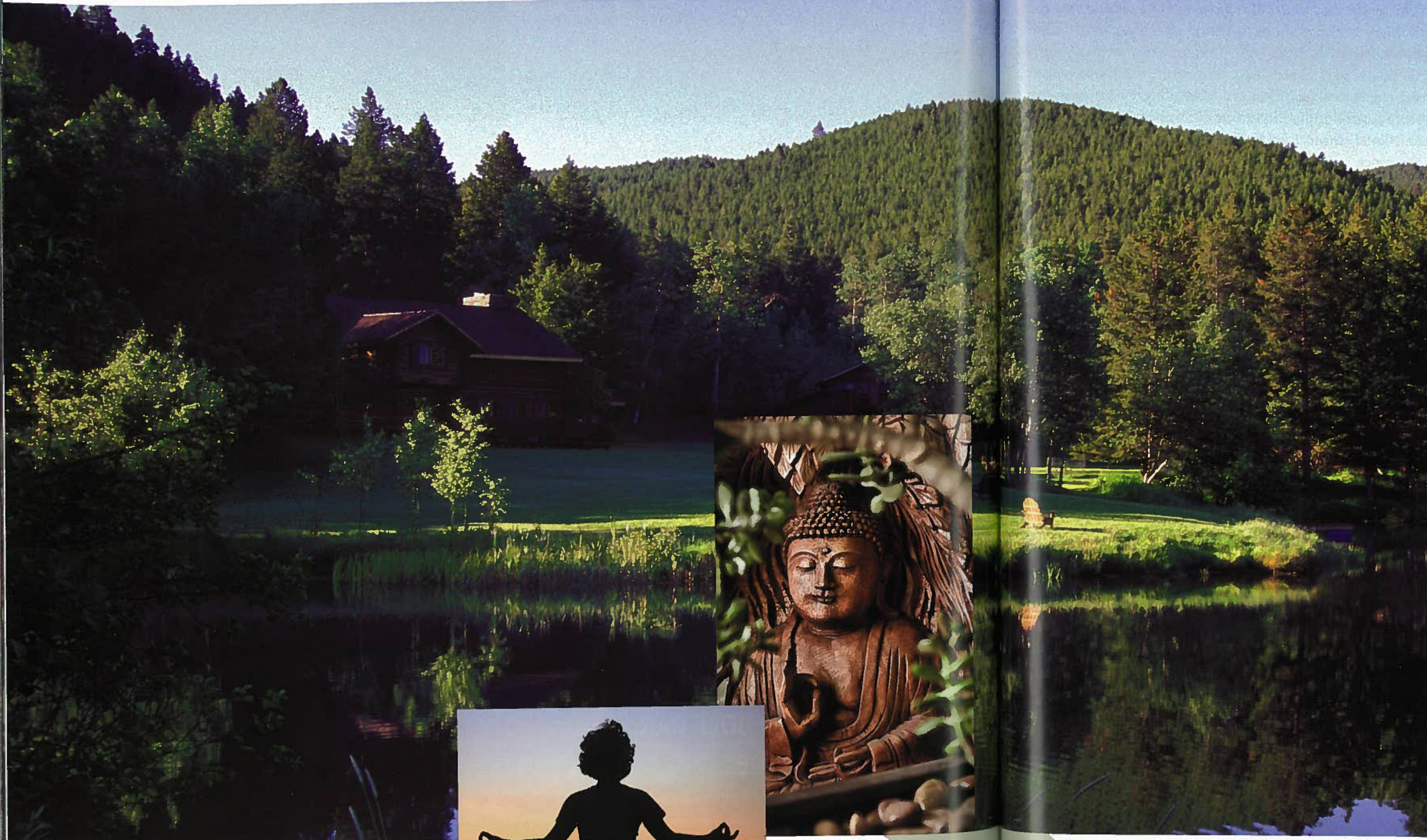


Feathered Pipe Ranch

By Claire Baiz



"Equal to the beauty that surrounds us is the spirit of the Feathered Pipe Ranch. You'll feel cared for and nurtured in every way, so that you are free to immerse yourself in a workshop, play and explore, change and row and most of all relax."

~India Supera

One of the very first guests of the Feathered Pipe Ranch panicked in the Helena airport.

The owner of Feathered Pipe, India Supera, arrived late, and found the guest frantically searching the airport for a rental car, nearly in tears. There were no rental cars at the Helena airport back then.

"My friends thought I was nuts," the young lady, still visibly shaken, told India as she loaded her bags onto the truck for the drive to the Feathered Pipe Ranch. In a recent interview, India let loose with a Buddha-like laugh at the memory.

"This lady's friends from California told her not to come. They had never heard of our organization and had no idea if it was legitimate." The guest paid \$250 for a two-week retreat. She came back, this time with several friends. They brought more friends.

It's pretty well accepted that if you study Yoga in the United States, one of your teachers attended or taught a workshop at Feathered Pipe, just outside Helena, Montana. The Feathered Pipe Ranch has grown to become one of the very oldest and most respected Yoga retreats in the nation.

Which is not bad, considering the owner had one day to get used to the idea.

India In India: The Beginning

India Supera always had wanderlust. By the time she was sixteen, she had forged out on her own, leaving her family's California home for adventures that began in Mexico, and continue to this day. I met with this peaceful dynamo in Helena, between trips to New York and England.

India has always been fascinated by the nation after which she was named. As a kid, she'd buy used *National Geographic* magazines and paste the pictures on her wall. At the age of 23, India Supera traveled to the nation that gave her its name by saving wages from odd jobs.

Traveling overland from Turkey, the nearly penniless adventurer made new friends in odd ways. In Afghanistan she helped deliver a baby, in Turkey she befriended the wrong crowd and was thrown in jail.

The life of an aesthete was grueling. India recovered from hepatitis, only to contract periodontal disease, which became so painful that she fainted. Luckily by that time, India had met her spiritual teacher, the famous Sai Baba. Another devotee of Sai Baba took pity on her. The woman, Jeri Duncan, took India under her wing, and bartered an exchange for the cost of airfare back to Duncan's newly purchased ranch near Helena, Montana.

The tables took a sad turn, and soon after Jeri Duncan returned to Montana, Duncan was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer. India Supera cared for her. The day before she died, Jeri Duncan told India Supera that she was giving India the ranch.

"I had no comprehension of what it took to run this place," India recalled. After Duncan died, India decided her future was back with Sai Baba, not with a big ranch in a remote state.

"I had hopes," India told me, "that the ranch would sell and I would be able to live off the proceeds in India for a long time."

Before departing, the new landowner and some friends held a sweat lodge on her new ranch. Under stretched animal hides and bent branches, India Supera had a vision of the future of Feathered Pipe. Like many of us who have visions, she pushed the experience aside, and boarded the plane for Sai Baba's ashram in Andhra Pradesh.

India Supera had only been abroad for a few weeks when Sai Baba gave her a simple request, "Go back. Start a school."

Though she returned to Helena, India still wasn't convinced about the wisdom of keeping the land and turning it into a

school or retreat. A self-professed doubting Thomas, India needed encouragement and direction like a typical American, India used some remaining cash from Duncan's estate and went back to India (again) to ask Sai Baba, "Are you sure?"

"What can I teach?" the 26 year old asked Sai Baba when she arrived at his ashram.

"Start with what you know," Sai Baba gently advised. "You know a bit about astrology, Yoga, and nutrition."

India Supera had crossed paths with Zipporah Dobbins, a pre-eminent astrologer; Judith Lasater, a well-established Yoga teacher; and Bernard Jensen, the famous nutritionist. These pioneers facilitated the very first workshops at Feathered Pipe.

The Feathered Pipe has been smoking ever since.

This year Feathered Pipe and its neighboring guest ranch, The Blacktail Ranch, will host about fifteen workshops, trips or retreats, mainly for the serious Yoga student.

Yogas In Cowboy Hats

The Yoga Alliance claims that over 17 million people in the U.S. practice some form of Yoga, but there aren't very many serious students in Montana, according to India Supera. Only about five percent of the guests at Feathered Pipe are Montanans—a figure they'd love to see increase in the future. Supera emphasizes that scholarships are available, especially for locals with a committed Yoga practice.

Just about every Yoga teacher in Montana is familiar with Feathered Pipe. "All you have to do is ask," India intones.

The Feathered Pipe Foundation believes strongly in service, and it offers special programs and several free workshops for men and women who suffer from AIDS. The Foundation also supports human rights and environmental issues. India Supera particularly honors Native American traditions; Feathered Pipe recently held a free five-day event.

Though some Montanans might still consider Feathered Pipe Ranch a strange place, India feels very well accepted these days. For the first decade or so, Helenans referred to India and her ex-husband, Laughing Water, as "The Hippies at the End of the Gulch". The couple still co-own the Real Food Store in Helena, and from the crowd of shoppers and deli customers, it's hard to remember the days when organic produce was "weird".

Hold That Pose

"Yoga serves body, mind and spirit," India Supera emphasizes—just about anyone can begin a satisfying practice, which generally begins with a series of physical exercises to help you feel well.

There are eight schools of Yoga, ranging from devotional Yoga and meditative Yoga to the very popular Hatha, or physical Yoga. The most popular practice in the U.S., Hatha Yoga, made famous by B.K.S. Iyengar, opens the mind to other Yogic paths. In that way, a Yoga practice is like a vacation in Montana: the mind quiets, and a special experience results. **AM**



~Claire Baiz, a Great Falls native, owns Big Sky Gold & Diamond Brokers in Great Falls and is a freelance writer.

On a map, Feathered Pipe Ranch appears to be about five miles from Helena, eighty miles south of Great Falls. For Montanans who've been there, it's never far away in their hearts.

Pam Quinn, a Yoga teacher at Paris Gibson Square in Great Falls, calls the Feathered Pipe Ranch a "safe place to go inside". Quinn attended weekend retreats and numerous in-depth master classes there over the last fifteen years. It's been a couple of years since her last visit; she's aching to go back.

"This isn't a luxury spa," Quinn remarks. "It's a rustic retreat that nurtures a Yoga practice." The experience is meant to draw guests inward. The large main lodge, where classes take place, offers simple dorm-like accommodations. There are also cabins and a few special circular yurts. Every guest room has white cotton bedding and a simple dresser. There's no television, and only one payphone in the lodge.

Yoga workshops all evoke camaraderie, says Quinn, but the Feathered Pipe Ranch, with its intimate, natural setting and small class size celebrates a special intimacy with nature. The retreat appeals to world-renowned Yoga instructors as well as celebrities who crave time away from the spotlight.

Rodney Yee, Liliás Folan and Judith Lasater are among the internationally well respected Yoga teachers coming from distant

cities to lead classes this year. The trip is much shorter for Judy Landecker, a Yoga teacher who lives in Helena. Landecker, who has studied Hatha Yoga under the renowned B.K.S. Iyengar, offers one of the few Feathered Pipe programs that are suitable for folks who are just beginning a serious Yoga Practice.

Mike Sutphin, who works at the Montana National Guard, attended his first Feathered Pipe retreat just a couple of months after taking up Yoga, and has returned three or four times in the last eight years. "There is a great acceptance of ability and capability at Feathered Pipe Ranch," says Sutphin, "the fellowship and lack of distraction enhance my practice."

There are misconceptions about Yoga, according to Sutphin. "Some guys might believe it's not exercise unless you are sweating and lifting a lot of weight, but once they start, they see the benefits and enjoyment of Yoga."

A typical day at the ranch might include morning and afternoon classes in the lodge, hiking, a massage, a dip in the hot tub or paddling a canoe in the large pond. According to both Quinn and Sutphin, everyone looks forward to Feathered Pipe's famous organic fare, often served outdoors.

Visiting Feathered Pipe Ranch is as much an inner journey as an outer one, no matter how short or long the trip to the ranch might be.



There is still space available for this year's workshops and retreats. Please log on to featheredpipe.com or call their Helena office at (406) 442-8196.

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