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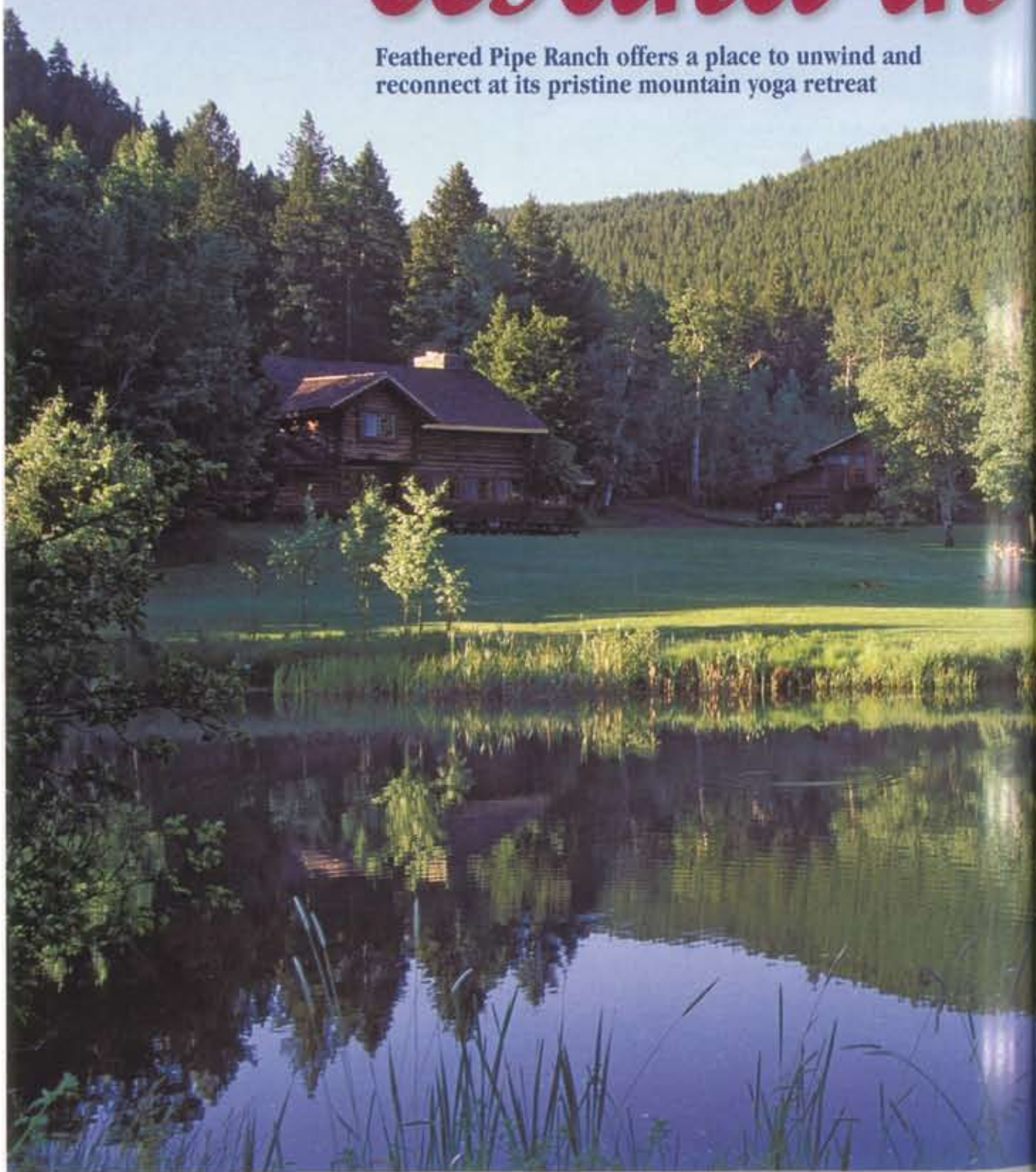
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Asana in

Feathered Pipe Ranch offers a place to unwind and reconnect at its pristine mountain yoga retreat



Montana

By Martin Kidston

IN A DARKENED ROOM ON A warm August morning, a dozen guests lie upon foam mats and pillows spread across the floor. Their mood is subdued, verging on bliss. The deep-down easy feeling lasts until the session ends and the lights flick on, drawing the guests from the deepest repose of their lives.

For nearly thirty-one years, Judith Lasater, a San Francisco-based yoga instructor, has been teaching over-hurried guests at the Feathered Pipe Ranch how to tune their minds and bodies into peaceful harmony. When people relax, she believes, they do less harm to themselves and they do right by the world.

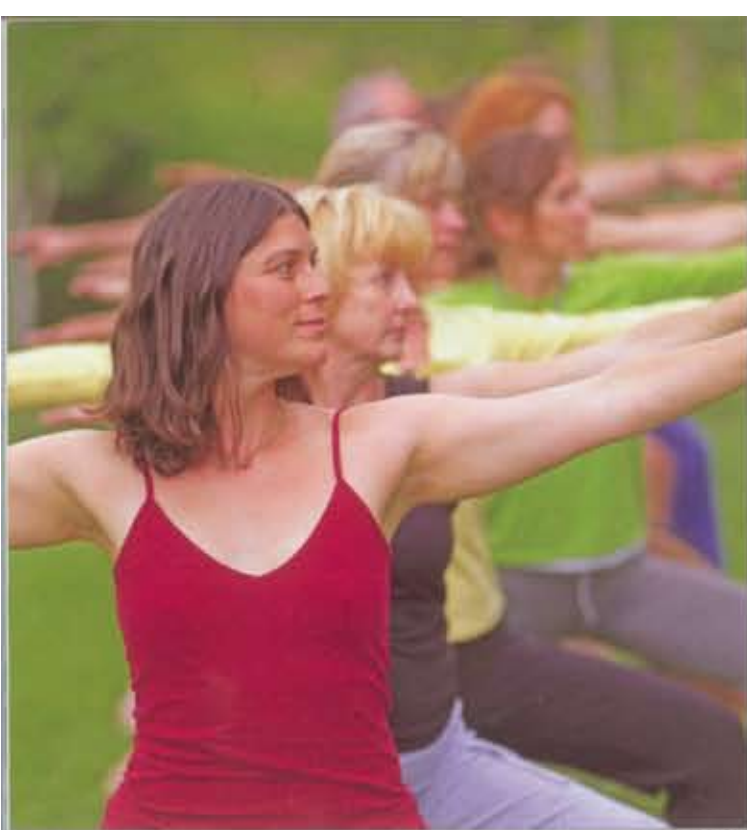
ELUGA WELIF PHOTO

The Feathered Pipe Ranch lies nestled in the mountains near Helena.

INSET: World-renowned yoga instructors put on workshops, drawing visitors from around the country.



KEITH LEVY PHOTO



KEITH LEVIT PHOTO

Lasater, a Ph.D. in East-West psychology, serves as the president of the California Yoga Teachers Association, making her one of the nation's foremost instructors. She's taught in forty-one states plus Japan, Peru, Mexico, and England. Her two books, which include *RELAX AND RENEW: RESTFUL YOGA FOR STRESSFUL TIMES*, have helped thousands learn to conquer chronic stress.

When her session ends this sunny morning, Lasater drapes a shawl over her shoulders and finds a seat in the shade. She smiles and waits as if time is on her side. Nearby, several café-style tables sit in the yard. Lunch will be served at any moment, signaled by the blowing of a Viking horn.

India Supera, director and cofounder of the Feathered Pipe Ranch, first invited Lasater to the ranch to teach in 1975. It was the first class ever offered at the ranch, it lasted three

weeks, and cost just \$250, including lodging. "The ranch became a special place to me," Lasater said, her husband sitting at her side. "Coming back each year is a lot like attending a family reunion. Every year, it's a touchstone on how I've grown and changed."

Guests arrive at the retreat as strangers and leave with a common bond. New friendships are formed, some lasting for decades, including that between Lasater and Supera.

When Lasater talks about yoga, she describes an art that transcends philosophy and religion. Much more than stretching and breathing, it goes to the root of a person's being. It's a deeper way of knowing one's self and discovering his or her place in the world. "The trappings of my life back in San Francisco suddenly aren't so important," she once wrote about her visits to the ranch. "My cell

phone and day planner no longer control me. The only things on my agenda are teaching, exploring nature, catching up with old friends, having fun, and eating good food."

The philosophy of inner peace is evident throughout the hundred-acre retreat, which Supera has built over the past three decades. The ranch sits twenty-four miles southwest of Helena at the end of Colorado Gulch. Trails run from the lodge in all directions, snaking their way through heavy timber. Moose, along with the occasional black bear, have been known to wander by, sipping water from the springs or wading in the pond.

On a hill overlooking the lodge, Tibetan prayer flags flap in a pine-scented breeze. Some flags remain brilliant with color. Others have faded in the

sun. "The ones with color in them still have prayers coming from them," Supera says one day after a hike up the hill. "They were hung this year on Buddha's birthday. When they lose their color, it means their prayers have been taken."

The rocky knoll is something of a sanctuary, a high point with a view of the sky. It's here that Supera, a self-proclaimed hippie with flowing black hair, begins talking about time and money. "You either have one or the other," she explains, letting a prayer flag slip through her fingers. "When we were young and started this place, we didn't have any money, but we had lots of time."

Supera now spends her days catering to Hollywood stars, CEOs, and everyday people looking to train with instructors like Lasater, Seane Corn, Robert Bruce, and Erich Schiffmann. In



KEITH LEVIT PHOTO



ELIZA WILEY PHOTO



ELIZA WILEY PHOTO

fact, Supera said, nearly everyone who studies yoga in the U.S. is likely studying with a teacher who trained at the ranch, "or studied with a teacher who had a teacher" who studied at the ranch.

Tibetan monks have been guests here, as have certain Hollywood stars. Supera keeps their names to herself, although she does mention actor John Voight. Later, another ranch employee admits Ashley Judd comes around nearly once a year.

Using a walking stick she's picked off the ground, Supera navigates her way down the hill. Upon reaching the bottom, she stops to inspect a yurt. Once inside, she recalls the early 1970s, when she first inherited the ranch. She tried to place the property on the real estate market for \$180,000—small change compared to its current value.

In a stroke of intervention, a friend begged Supera to reconsider selling, at least until she prayed over the land. "We did a sweat and during that sweat I had a

vision. I wasn't supposed to sell the ranch. I finally saw what I was supposed to do with it."

The yurt's canvas walls stretch tight over a lattice frame. Sunlight illuminates the walls while pine bows dance above. The yurt resembles a Mongolian-style home used by shepherds and nomads. It fits well in the Montana forest, along with the teepees nearby, representing a blend of Eastern and Native American cultures—a theme Supera has woven into the ranch's fabric.

"The best thing you can do is bathe in the trees," she said, running her hand down the trunk of an old-growth pine. "Even though they're under siege in our communities, the trees stand strong and take a lot. If you're sleeping out here, you feel differently when you wake up."

The smell of canvas and pine sing of camping, which is what the clients do when they leave behind their cell phones, computers, and corporate schedules to spend a week here. These things, Supera believes, take away part of our souls. They kill us slowly, one task at a time.

It's easy to understand Supera's methods and beliefs. The more she talks, the more she reveals a simple life aimed at introspection and significance. It's what brings her clients back year after year. The guests aren't pampered, no matter who they are or where they come from.



LIZZY WILKES PHOTO

Instead of pillow-top beds, ranch guests curl up on wooden cots overlaid with a thin mattress. Linen is provided, as are pillows, but the showers are a short hike through the woods and the pay phone is up the road. There are no televisions, no Internet, and getting reception on a cell-phone requires a ten-mile drive down a winding dirt road. Between classes guests can hike, swim, jump off the rope swing, canoe, take a nap, get a massage, or soak in the cedar-barrel hot tub. The entire affair is best described as a sleep-away camp for adults looking to unwind through yoga. Giggling is allowed.

Ranch manager Howard Levin has played a hand in creating the ranch's international and meditative feel. He met Supera on the border between Turkey and Greece back in 1968. They were both hippies backpacking with friends when their paths crossed that summer. Together, they trekked into India to visit a guru.

It wasn't until 1981 that Levin began visiting

the retreat, breaking away from the rigors of big-city living. Before his arrival, he had worked as a designer, decorating interiors for the likes of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. Interior decorating was fun, Levin admits, but there was something missing. He fell in love with Montana and decided to stay. "You feel like you're earning your living in a righteous way working here," he said. "We all have a great connection. After thirty-eight years, we're like family."

Levin stood in the kitchen eating a sandwich. He doesn't like the sun on his head, so he opts for the shade while explaining how yoga found its way into Montana, a place some still believe lacks the accoutrements of modern society.

Of course, Levin knows better, though he admits that the Feathered Pipe Ranch is better known outside the state than inside. "Several years ago, if we had one person from Montana

FACING PAGE: Many of the classes at Feathered Pipe Ranch are held outside, weather permitting, top. While the classes mainly cater to adults, kids have also been part of the events at the ranch, left. The ranch is known for its exceptional food.

THIS PAGE: Guests stay in yurts at the ranch.

attend all summer, we'd be thrilled. Now we're getting four or five Montanans every week. Yoga is more mainstream than it was thirty years ago."

Helena, the nearest large Montana city, was little more than a quiet government town when Supera arrived in the 1970s. As the self-proclaimed queen of the hippies, she admits to such influences as Ram Dass and Timothy Leary, the latter known for advocating his perceived benefits of LSD.

Needless to say, Supera stood out from the local color, and it wasn't long before the rumors were flying. One morning at the 4B's restaurant, she overheard a hardware dealer and rancher, along with several of their



ELISA WALBY PHOTO

friends, talking about "the hippies at the end of the gulch." When she heard hippies and gulch, Supera knew they were talking about her. "I listened to their whole conversation. Nobody had any concept what we were doing or what yoga was back then."

Back then, Supera was fixing the ranch, which meant numerous trips to the hardware store. The owner had come to know

her as a customer, and with his buddies going on about "the hippies at the end of gulch," he finally piped up and said, "I don't know much about those people, but they work hard and they pay their bills."

The man's remark ended the conversation on the spot. It also taught Supera her first lesson about Montana living. "I realized you could be an ax murderer here as long as you worked hard and paid your bills. I think we could have gone one step further by going to church on Sundays."


Supera admits there were other obstacles to overcome. Her personal accountant pooh-poohed her idea of a yoga retreat, saying no right-minded American would pay for

such New Age hogwash, especially in Montana. While it took time and perseverance, along with a national movement toward healthy living and some help from friends, her idea caught on.

After Lasater's "rest and renewal class," some of the guests enter the Garden of Grace. They pass under a stone archway to smell wild onions, pansies, irises and lupine. Strawberries and bleeding hearts grow in clusters along a brick pathway. There's a peace





THIS PAGE: India Supera is the director and co-founder.

FACING PAGE: While some students are more advanced, there are classes for all levels.



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pole and a Zen path where guests pause to contemplate whatever fills their thoughts.

Others sit down at the café tables to a pasta lunch, the scent of garlic sweet in the air. Later, dinner might include sweet and spicy nori rolls, a cabbage and sprout salad sprinkled with sesame-seed dressing, and barley with gingered adzuki beans. Meat is available to those who ask for it. The food is light and healthy and, everyone agrees, stands out among the retreat's top attractions.

This is Montana and the cuisine isn't what you'd find on a standard downtown menu. Then again, Supera has always done things her own way, never minding what other

people think. "This was the wrong state to be a vegetarian in," she said, grinning. "In the early days, all our neighbors were beef farmers. They understood yogurt—it was a dairy product. But to them, yoga and vegetarianism was something they didn't understand."

That has changed thanks to yoga's international appeal and the reputation of instructors who teach here. Lasater, who lives in San Francisco, has been coming back each year for the last 31 years, turning a dream into a career. "I didn't even know there was a career teaching yoga when I first started," she said. "Thirty-one years later, I'm still getting paid doing what I love to do."

The art of yoga is no



KEITH LUVIT PHOTO

longer a secret, though Lasater believes it's still not entirely understood. What does it teach? First and foremost, she says, it teaches patience. It teaches practitioners how to focus on performing one task at a time. Those who multitask on the job must learn to shift gears and slow down. "We tend to do more and more in less and less time. If you don't think you're addicted to speed, try using

a rotary phone."

On the first day of class, many of Lasater's clients fall asleep. She says it's natural given the lives they lead. They come tired, wrapped around the axle, frazzled from a complex world. But there's a distinction between resting and sleeping. It's a subtle one, she insists, but one that people must learn to achieve. "They have to learn to be there, to be present, to relax." **M**

MARTIN KIDSTON, a freelance writer and reporter at the *INDEPENDENT RECORD*, is the author of two books, including *FROM POPLAR TO PAPUA: MONTANA'S 163RD INFANTRY REGIMENT IN WORLD WAR II*. He lives in Helena.

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