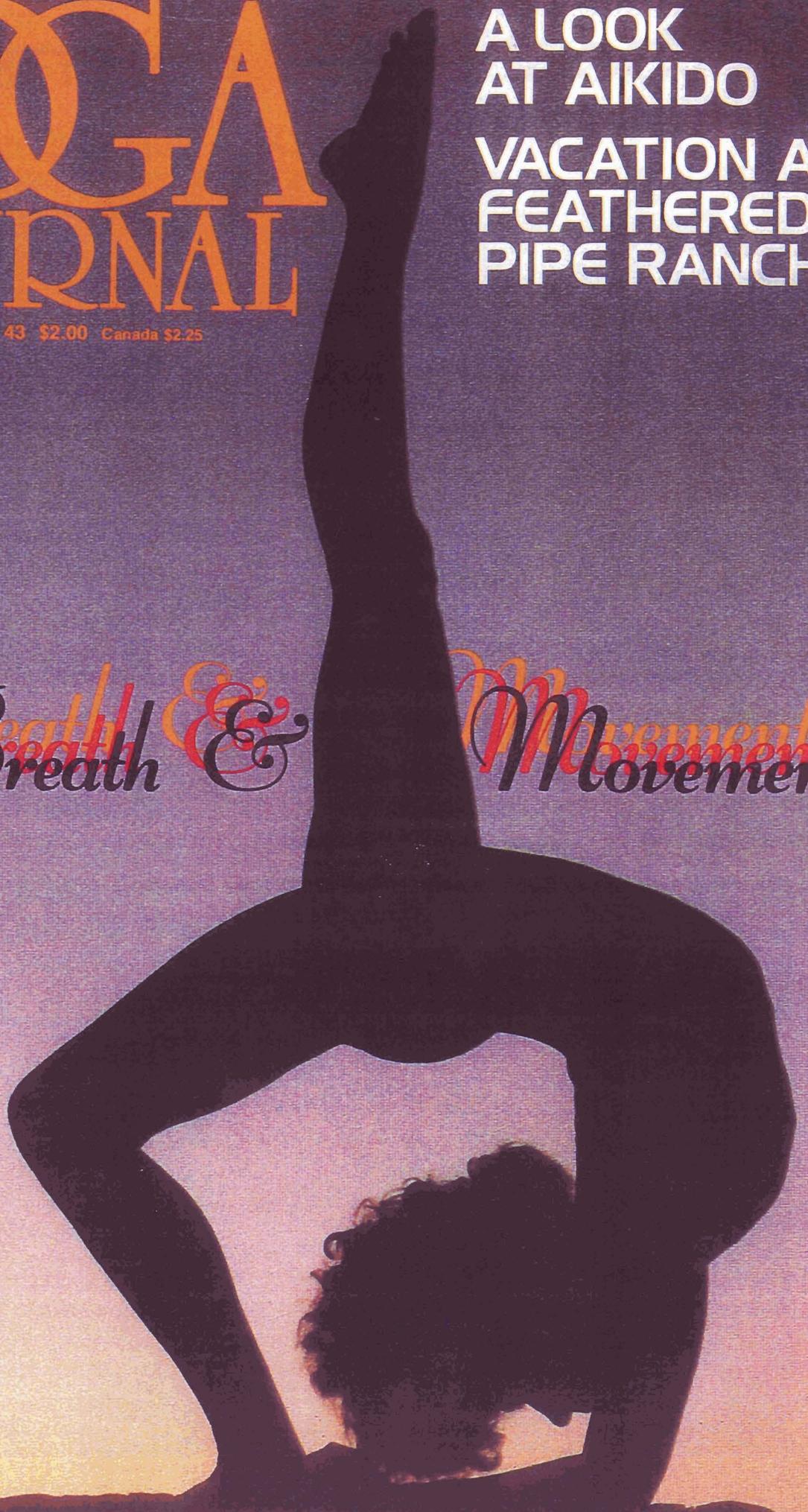


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A LOOK
AT AIKIDO
VACATION AT
FEATHERED
PIPE RANCH

Breath & Movement



I got my first impression of Feathered Pipe Ranch even before my arrival. Our plane was full when we left Salt Lake City, but most of the passengers got off on subsequent stops and only about ten of us remained for the last leg of the journey to Helena. (At this point I could already tell which of my fellow passengers were going to be workshop participants: they were the ones using strange words like "sacrum" and "Urdhva Dhanurasana.") Our tiny group arrived at a miniscule airport which boasted all of two gates. Obviously this Helena, Montana, was really out in the boonies. The four of us attending the workshop were met by a young man in a Feathered Pipe Ranch T-shirt who seemed to know everyone but me. Warm greetings were exchanged and stories traded; it seemed more like a family reunion than an airport limousine service. Over the next ten days, I was to learn that the Feathered Pipe Ranch functions as an extended family to both its staff and students. "Two-thirds of the people coming to yoga workshops are alumnae," Heidi Goldman, director of Yoga Vacations,

told me. "Once people find the Feathered Pipe Ranch, they've found a little secret hideaway in the woods they really like, and they come back feeling they're coming home."

"Home," in this case, is not a bad place to be. Feathered Pipe Ranch sits on 110 acres located 11 miles outside Helena. Three large structures built of logs ring one side of a small lake and, for those who prefer outdoor living, tepees and tents dot the wooded landscape. A bathhouse with sauna and hot tub lies a short walk from the main living area. The rolling hills are crisscrossed with hiking trails and studded with wildflowers, and it is not uncommon to see deer or moose wandering through less-frequented regions. The close contact with nature can have its humorous aspects; India Supera, owner of the ranch, tells the story of one grouse who stayed near the bathhouse while it was under construction. "It would supervise, take nails, walk with people, and escort them to the bathhouse," she said. "A lot of people that year said they only came so the grouse could walk them to the door of the bathhouse."

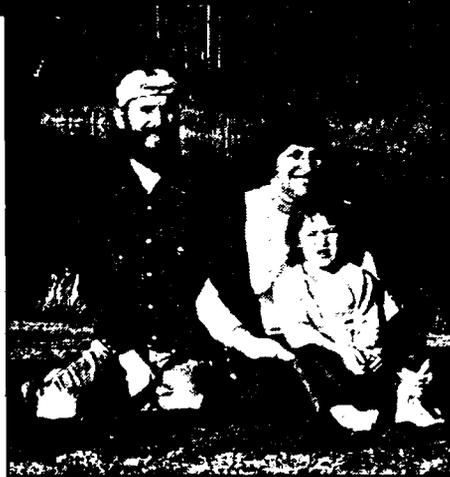
When we arrived at the ranch, my companion and I decided to become Indians for a week, and up housekeeping in a hillside tepee. Life moved into a new pattern; instead of being planned around telephones, meetings and deadlines, with asana practice squeezed into the day's spare moments, yoga now took center stage, along with good company, wonderful food and clean air. I awoke to the sound of birds chirping in the woods, and made my leisurely way down the hill to the first of three daily yoga classes, which were interspersed with three marvelous meals. We spent our spare time renewing old friendships or beginning new ones, going on hikes, learning to pilot a canoe (my roommate and I had decided that anyone who lived in a tepee should be able to paddle around the lake in a canoe). The day's biggest decision might be whether to take a sauna or a hot tub. In such an atmosphere, yoga practice can be renewed, clarity restored to the mind, and one's everyday life seen with new eyes.

It is not uncommon for this per

of expanding horizons to produce a transformation in a visitor's life. India Supera likes to tell the story of a 74-year-old recent widow who was affectionately called Grandma Bess. She had come to an astrology workshop, India said, but "once she was here, she didn't want to do astrology, she wanted to go live in a tepee."

"It turned out she had never in her life slept outside," India said. "She had never even slept alone in a room until her husband died. And here she was in a tepee doing a three-day fast." Most workshop participants don't go through changes that dramatic, but India maintains that "the grounds are healing grounds, and the workshops and people act as catalysts. The reason people keep coming here is that the place allows them to change; it gives them the space that they need."

Heidi Goldman likes to tell the story of a man named Peter who came to a John Lilly workshop. "He was both a doctor and a lawyer, a very mental person," she recalled. "He complained the whole time he was here; he even bitched all the way to



India Supera, Laughing Water and their daughter, Crystal

the airport when he left. That winter we got a letter saying that the workshop changed his life and he was transformed. The next year he came for a Robert Monroe workshop, and he was the belle of the ball, had a great time, and loved everything. The third year he came to a T'ai Chi workshop, which was really wonderful. I remember on his first trip he had come with about two suitcases of books, and now here he was, purely in the physical with Al Huang."

Laughing Water, India's husband, contends that people who come to the ranch are generally in a stage of evolution. "They're usually successful people, often in transition," he said. "They have found themselves finishing something in their lives and graduating to another stage. It's tremendously refreshing and invigorating to talk with them." Even the symbol of the feathered pipe bears connotations of transformation. Legend has it that migratory tribes of Indians used to suspend a feathered pipe from a leather thong, and travel in whatever direction it pointed. So the feathered pipe is a symbol of guidance from the great spirit. Laughing Water said the Feathered Pipe Ranch is "a place where people come for direction. It certainly was that for me."

Central to the Feathered Pipe Ranch experience, of course, are the workshops themselves. The ranch offers a selection of seven to ten-day programs in holistic fields like astrology and nutrition, as well as workshops devoted specifically to the practice of yoga. The list of workshop

instructors reads like a who's who of the various new age fields; in recent years Jack Schwarz, Paavo Airola, John Lilly, Al Chung-Liang Huang and Bernard Jensen have given seminars at the ranch, and yoga has been or will be taught by such respected instructors as Ramanand Patel, Angela Farmer, Liliás Folan, Judith Lasater, Victor van Kooten and Ruth Bender. Heidi Goldman stresses that she likes variety. "I don't think the Iyengar approach is the only method that is good," she said. "Often our teachers just represent themselves and their own deep practice. Each group that comes to the ranch brings its own energy." Tom Ryan added: "We don't follow any particular religious teachings or guru. We all have our own spiritual beliefs. This is a business, and everybody can feel and live and express their own spirituality here. You're not shut off because you have any particular belief, or you don't have any belief."

As time goes on, the variety of programs is expanding, so that the ranch may appeal to a broader spectrum of people, and former participants may return to be inspired by new teachers. This year, for example, Ruth Bender and Ken Stinett are giving a new workshop for ambulatory people with degenerative diseases. Stinett is a yoga teacher with multiple sclerosis, which he has brought completely under control through yoga and nutrition. Heidi Goldman is enthusiastic about the possibilities of the workshop. "I'd like to see professionals and ambulatory people working together," she said, "so that the professionals can take what they've learned back to their work, and the ambulatory people can spread the wonderful news by their own example. The worst part about MS is that someone who has it is diagnosed as having an incurable disease, and therefore they stop trying. We had three MS patients at our last workshop, and they all did terrifically."

With the stimulating workshops and restful physical setting, the ranch offers a third feature, near and dear to almost every yoga practitioner: food. In fact before I went to Feathered Pipe Ranch, I think I had heard more stories about the food than any other aspect of the place. I licked my lips and arrived prepared

for a culinary adventure, and was not disappointed. An old-timer at the ranch jokingly gave me his formula for a visit there: add one pound to your weight for each day of your workshop. I thought his comment was funny until I saw myself in the mirror after I got home. Heidi explained, "We're really good cooks; we're gourmet and we don't skimp. I feel that people have paid for good food, and that's what I'm going to give them. Everything is fresh; the only canned things are a couple of cans of tomatoes. We have to cater to people who are macrobiotic, or don't eat dairy, or don't eat fish or poultry or eggs. We do it all, and it's easy, once you get the hang of it."

"Food is a very important issue," she said. "If you turn people off and they think they don't know how to eat or can't get what they want, they'll never come back. One of the things we try to do is make sure that there's more than enough food. I don't want people to be afraid that there's not enough. There is always plenty." As a journalist I felt obliged to confirm the veracity of these claims by having thirds at each meal. Alas, there was always plenty.

Four people played a major role in making Feathered Pipe Ranch what it is today: India Supera, Laughing Water, Heidi Goldman and Tom Ryan. As it does for their visitors, the ranch has inspired them to make major changes in their lives. For each of them, coming to the ranch made them change in ways that both marked a personal milestone and provided a skill vital to the ranch's survival as a business. In fact one wonders after hearing their stories whether they shaped the ranch or vice versa. As Tom Ryan put it, "We were all drawn together here, as if we were picked out of the universe because of latent talents we had." As a foursome they seem to form a single, well-integrated person, with all the skills and personality characteristics needed to run the ranch.

The story of ranch owner India Supera is the kind that must be true, because no one could make it up. It could no doubt fill two books, but to save time, we will join India at Sai Baba's ashram in India, after the days she spent as an unhappy Southern California teenager, a successful hippie hanging around with Timothy

Leary in Mexico, a forced resident of a convent in Italy, the guest of a royal family in Afghanistan, a victim of hepatitis in Pakistan, a mountain climber in Nepal, and an Indian sadhu with shaved head, who, while in India, ran into her long-lost sister. One day, while living at Sai Baba's ashram, India was meditating on a hillside when she saw a woman walking near her. "She was a tall American woman wearing a blue silk sari," India said. "It was a very strange experience. I even knew her name, although I had never met her. And she knew who I was. I said, 'Oh, you're Jeri Duncan.' She said, 'No. I'm Jeri Duncan Graham. I just got married.'"

The woman was then the owner of the Feathered Pipe Ranch. She ended up staying with India and her sister for four months before returning to the United States with her husband. After her return, Jeri was having marital problems. She asked India to join her for a few months at her ranch in Montana. After India's arrival Jeri discovered she had cancer, and India nursed her until her death a year later. Four days before she died, Jeri called India in and said that she wanted to leave her the ranch, to be turned into a learning center. Despite India's protests, Jeri was firm. India recalled, "I felt I was stuck with this white elephant. I had never even had a checkbook or any money, and here I was with this place, which, at the time, cost about \$20,000 a year to maintain." She immediately put the ranch on the market, but, although she was asking a ridiculously low price, no one came to look at it. Some months later, India and several other people had a profound visionary experience in which they saw clearly that the ranch was meant to be an educational center. "The next day this Lincoln with a bar in the back drove up our road," India said. "Its occupants said, 'We want to buy this ranch. We're prepared to cash you out for \$500,000.' If you don't think your visions are tested, you should be standing there when someone opens up a briefcase and offers you a half a million dollars. I said no, I won't do it."

Though the decision had been made to create a healing center, India was far from making her dream a reality. At the time, she said, "I was sleeping three or four hours a day. The rest of the time I was doing

meditation and psychic work. I had to make a definite choice of what direction my life would take. I could continue the meditation, or I could do the administrative work which would enable this place to exist as an educational and healing center. Amazingly, I made that choice by keeping the books. I think there's nothing in the world more grounding than numbers."

It seems that whenever a particular skill or personality trait has been needed for Feathered Pipe Ranch to survive, a person with those traits has arrived on the scene. Enter at this point Tom Ryan, a man who was introduced to India through friends Judith and Ike Lasater. He came to work as a caretaker at the ranch. Tom had also had a great variety of life experiences, from serving in the military to being a hairdresser, and from living in suburban Los Angeles to living in Death Valley. But he was as down-to-earth as India was ethereal, and his energy provided a needed balance to hers.

Tom remembers India as being "always off in a trance," at that time. "I told her, look, if we're going to do this, it's going to take everybody to do it. You're going to have to put your feet on the ground, and I'm going to ground you." The ranch was as good for Tom as he was for it. "I had been sitting around in limbo," he said, "not knowing what direction to go. I remember telling a friend I didn't want a \$20,000-a-year job; I felt that if I ever needed a ranch, I'd have a ranch at my disposal; if I needed a sailboat, I'd have one at my disposal. And within that year I had four sailboats and this ranch at my disposal. I took the ranch over the sailboats, and came up here. It just fit. I'd never made it well in the city; it wasn't my atmosphere. The people here were good, and there was plenty of work." Tom's work in recent years has included building the bathhouse, remodelling the kitchen for large-scale use, and constructing a sundeck.

Laughing Water, who became India's husband, also came to the ranch through the Lasaters at about the same time as Tom and was at a significant transition point when he did so. He was a graduate in philosophy from MIT,

living in Berkeley. "I had wondered what I was going to do with my life," he said, "and kept thinking I had to specialize in something. I kept thinking 'I've got so many talents; I've got to pick something.' Well, I came here and I didn't have to pick. It picked me, in the first place, and almost everything I had become capable of doing in my life was valuable here. What I've allowed myself to become here is hard for me to conceive. I never thought I would be running a business and helping raise funds; in fact, when I came here,

I thought business was flat-out evil. After reading Taoist literature, it was totally alien to me to take charge of anything. But there was no choice here; the place kind of demanded it. Laughing Water came to the ranch as the cook; later he opened a natural food store in Helena, which helps to supply and support the ranch. He now handles areas as diverse as keeping books, writing ads and brochures, taking pictures for publicity, and doing computer programming for the store.

Continued next page

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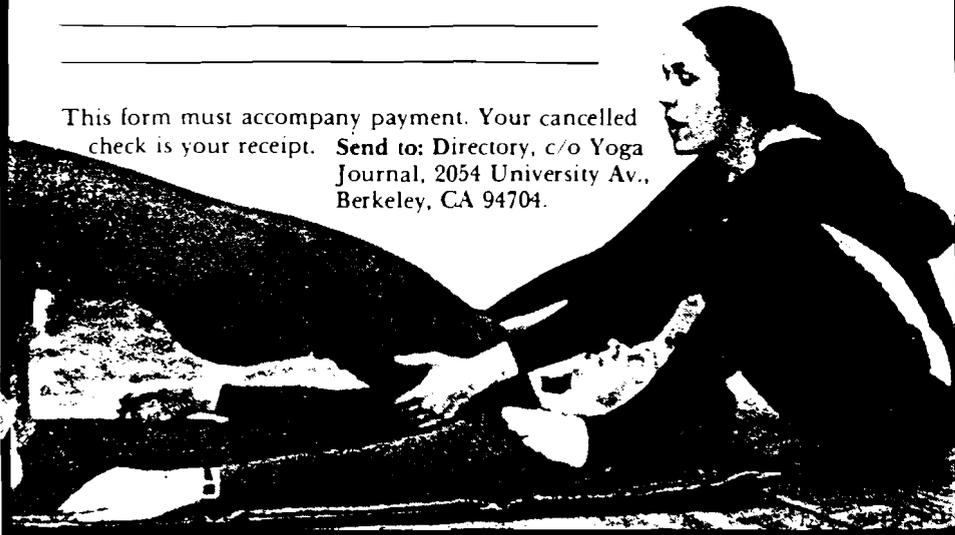
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The fourth link in the chain is Heidi Goldman. Heidi was an art student and yoga teacher who came to the ranch through her connection with Tom Ryan, who later became her husband. Heidi supervised the ranch's kitchen for some years; now she directs the Yoga Vacations program. For Heidi, living at the ranch has provided an opportunity for the development of interpersonal relationships. As she put it, "living with a group of people is very difficult, and equally rewarding. None of us are alike, and I don't think that any of us, if we were in a group of a thousand people, would have picked each other to be friends. We're like family; we just found ourselves together and love each other for who we are. I have grown to love India and Laughing Water more and more every year. It seems to grow fuller and fuller, richer and richer."

A great deal of the family feeling at the Feathered Pipe Ranch stems from the deep relationship between these four people. Tom recalled that the first winter at the ranch, "India, her sister, Laughing Water and I didn't have money to do anything. The main room was too hard to heat, so we just huddled around the fireplace in the kitchen from morning till evening and told our life stories. That was really the time that bonded everyone together here." Today, that bonding includes ranch guests as well; Laughing Water said, "We're so into people that, even if we didn't have programs here, there'd still be a lot of people coming. It's a place that has to be shared. My saying is 'If we don't share it, we can't have it.'"

I think this attitude is apparent to the guests at the ranch; the place seems to facilitate closeness. By the end of my workshop all of us felt that we had known each other for many years.

The blending of many traditions at the Feathered Pipe Ranch was best summed up by Jungian therapist June Singer. One day she drove to the top of the Continental Divide and found the sun setting, the moon rising, and a rainbow hanging over the horizon—all at once. She decided that the Continental Divide, instead of being a division, is where East meets West and thrusts upwards to the heavens. It seems fitting that a retreat like the Feathered Pipe Ranch is located at such a juncture.★