

# POSTURE IT RIGHT

Times Square to Rishikesh, rave parties to *ashram* stays, hip and happening Yoga is making the world go round

by **RITU PANDEY**

“Y ou don’t go to the Times Square looking for peace... unless you are a *yogi*.” Isn’t that a powerful clincher for an ad inviting people to the world’s most interesting yoga session? That it even works is evident from the swelling numbers of those who converge every year for the Mind over Madness event in New York on summer solstice. This 21 June, Times Square is again expected to turn into a massive open air yoga studio with a crowd of almost 8,000 curving and contorting on colourful yoga mats in a bid to “find tranquillity and transcendence in the world’s most commercial and frenetic place.”

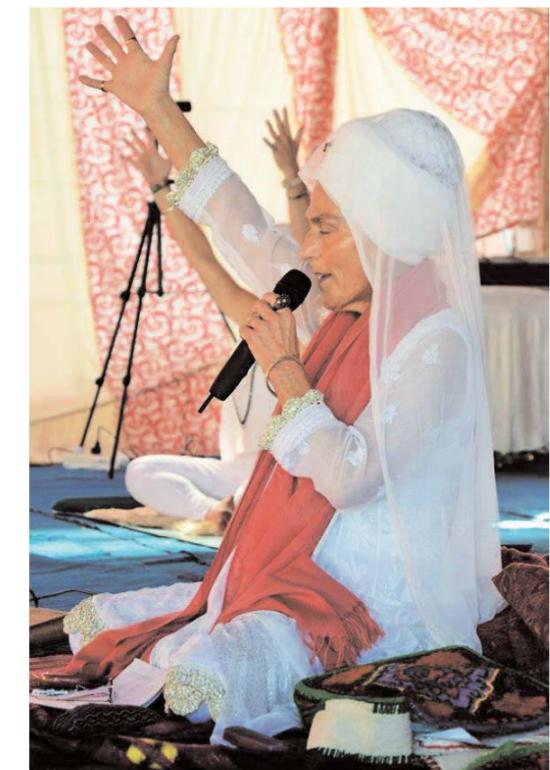
Being practised by masses in the heart of the world’s business capital, the age-old Indian practice of yoga has come a long way in the world well being story. Nouveau fitness enthusiasts may be seeking out Zumba, Pilates, Parkour and other such techniques. But for serious seekers of transcendence, Yoga is the thing. And coupled with meditation, Siddha, Naturopathy, Ayurveda, pranic healing, *mantra*, *Tantra* and holistic eating, it makes for a complete package that’s become the biggest driver of the modern “wellness” industry.

## YOGAPRENEURISM

Y ogapreneurs like Yogi Bhaajan and Bikram Choudhary realised the potential of this impressive combination early and used it cleverly to build their multi-million dollar empires and humongous following by introducing stressed Westerners to the goodness of yogic postures. Baba Ramdev and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar did the same with *desi* wellness seekers by taking them back to traditional wisdom. It made sense to everyone that

yoga, the discipline which actually referred to the union with the divine, was creatively adapted to modern times and conveniently turned into a lucrative brand of just physical postures.

And the brand spawned an exponentially growing market of yoga classes, celeb DVDs, workshops, conventions, retreats, mats, equipment, herbal medication, spa services, food and couture. In the US alone, Yoga is \$6.9 billion market a year that’s only growing by the day. “I come from America, which has advanced a lot materially and only confused mentally. That’s the reason it has seen such a huge explosion of yoga, all by word-of-mouth,” says Tommy Rosen, a California-based Vinyasa and Kundalini teacher.





**MOTHERLAND CALLING**

There may be no state promotion of yoga but it does help build the brand when US First Lady Michelle Obama holds a special session at the White House and Duchess Camilla, wife of Britain's Prince Charles, says in Rishikesh that next she wants to learn yoga by the Ganges. No surprise, aspirational yogis are a growing tribe internationally. And Motherland, as they call India, in particular Rishikesh — the gateway to the Himalayas, the source of yoga — is where they all want to study. So a stay in an *ashram* or a retreat to learn under a guru becomes essential for every aspiring yogi. Last month's yoga festival at the Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh saw some 500 participants from 50 countries in attendance, with impressive contingents from countries such as Japan, Germany and China.

In fact, it is the very combination of *ashrams*,

*babas* and holistic living by the Ganga that makes Rishikesh all hip and “spiritually” uplifting for the “enlightenment” seekers. “The first time I came here and somebody said Rishikesh is heaven on Earth, I thought that’s too loud and vain. It was over repeated visits that I realised how the heaven here isn’t something material. It’s a little deeper than what the West perceives heaven as. It has to be felt inside,” says Gabriela Bozic, co-founder of Jivamukti Yoga Centres in Germany.

**RISHIKESH ROCKS**

To the stressed Westerners, the Himalayan foothills, the all pervading hues of saffron, the simple *ashram* life of perceived inactivity and the soothing waters of the Ganga in Rishikesh make a perfect antidote to the high-energy hum of city life. And aspiring yogis make full use of this conducive ambience to follow into the yogic lifestyle, beginning with avoiding smoking and drinking, always appearing covered in public and following vegetarianism and austerity. Many take to learning Hindi or Sanskrit to better understand technicalities of yoga. Some join classical music and dance classes and a few even turn to the Indian way of life tending to cows and attending religious discourses. *Ashrams*, dance and music schools and Ayurveda spas, therefore, dot the nooks and crannies of Rishikesh. But



**BIZARRE STYLE DEVELOPED ABROAD**

- VOGA: YOGA DONE IN VOGUING DANCE STYLE
- DOGA: PRACTISED WITH DOGS
- ANTI-GRAVITY YOGA: ASANAS DONE SUSPENDED IN THE AIR
- TANTRUM YOGA: THAT DRAWS OUT YOUR INNER CHILD
- WHEELCHAIR YOGA: ADAPTED TO THE WHEELCHAIR
- KARAOKE YOGA: HELPS STRETCH LIMBS AND VOCAL CHORDS
- YOGA RAVES: PROMOTES DRUG-FREE FUN IN CLUBS WITH ASANAS, MUSIC AND MEDITATION
- HARMONICA YOGA: COMBINES ASANAS WITH PLAYING HARMONICA

*ashram* life is such a strong influence on the cityscape that even its hotels are forced to pack in holistic elements in their amenities. Things get interesting as you realise that in this competition to attract the yoga traffic, there’s actually little that distinguishes some *ashrams* from the city hotels. In fact, hotels like Ganga Kinare and Ganga appear to be promoting the yogic lifestyle a bit more than an average hotel is expected to with *ashram* essentials like daily Ganga *aarti*, *satvik* food on the menu and an annual yoga festival, even as *ashrams* go trendy in a bid to attract more foreigners.

**FESTIVALS GALORE**

Yoga festivals have become such an integral part of Rishikesh that almost every *ashram*, hotel and resort has one at some point in the year. And curiously, all are “international” irrespective of how expensive or cheap a place is. So last month no less than three “international” yoga festivals were jostling for foreign attention in the city, all on the same dates. For aspiring yogis, the more the merrier. Festivals offer practitioners a chance to catch up with experimentations and the best that’s happening in the wellness field from across the world. “Otherwise in *ashrams* it’s purely meditative yoga. This is an opportunity for a little change,” sums up Akhilesh Pandey, a yoga expert, who taught at Hotel Ganga Kinare’s festival.

**A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A YOGI**

Typically a yogi’s day starts well before dawn. At the Ganga Kinare festival too, things started early with meditation, *pranayam* and an hour of *asanas*. A *satvik* breakfast was followed by sessions on Ayurveda or chanting. Post a simple vegetarian lunch at noon, were sessions on Patanjali’s *Yog Sutra*, *Hatha Yoga* and *Yog Nidra* by experts like Roshan Singh and Dr Suhas. Dusk was time for nature worship, practised in the daily Ganga *aarti*. A yogic lifestyle prescribes early and light meals. So dinner time was early evening. The day ended by 9.30 with some light entertainment.

