



Wild thing

Yoga is about connecting body and mind, and realising that we're one with Mother Nature, not separate from her. It's time to return to nature: the original yoga studio.

Words Danielle Kirk

It's a Saturday morning and I am in *savasana*, the pose of the dead. My skin is tingling, freshly oxygenated blood heating it from within and the rays of a rising sun gently warming its surface. A briny breeze wafts into my nostrils as my body relaxes into the cooling, receptive, nurturing embrace of the sand below.

After a week of bustling through the city's concrete confines and gazing at screens, flowing through postures by the ocean grounds and reconnects me to all that is. I can breathe more deeply, feel more centred. Out in these silent, salty wilds, I am home.

A greater connection

This desire to connect with nature is not uncommon, if the upsurge in nature-based tourism is anything to go by. According to a study published in *PLOS Biology*, tourism accounted for about 10 per cent of gross domestic product worldwide in 2009, with wildlife viewing and outdoor recreation making up one of its fastest-growing sectors.

Social trends underlying such growth include increasing urbanisation, an associated emphasis on mental health and a desire for authentic experiences, researchers at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences found in a literature review last year. People are seeking out nature-based activities to help them stay well, understand themselves better and transform.

Perhaps this is why outdoor yoga and related travel experiences are on the rise. Among such offerings are the monthly yoga and hiking trips, or "yikes", that Perth-based yoga teacher Diana Madisson Elliot started two years ago. People come to connect with natural spaces, she says, and this desire sees them returning again and again.

"People re-establish their relationship with nature; they feel at peace and more balanced, stress-free and happy. They tell me that they've been able to recharge their batteries and find new

energy, feeling stronger in body and mind, more grounded and fully alive. The sleep they experience at night, they comment, is spectacular," she says.

Plus, yikes allow people to simply slow down. "We take time to stop the hectic flow of everyday life," Madisson Elliot says. "There is a very different concept of time out in nature; there are no deadlines to be met, no chores to be done."

It's a rare pause in an increasingly urbanised, stressful and wired world, enhanced by the opportunity to marvel at nature's beauty.

Nature cure

Modern folk may experience a greater separation from — and yearning for — Mother Nature, but her therapeutic powers have been long understood. Hippocrates wrote of the necessity of "airs, waters and places" for physical and mental wellbeing; early Roman texts refer to the countryside and urban green spaces as promoters of wellness.

Ancient yogis, too, knew of nature's regenerative influences. As Madisson Elliot shares, "Great yogis have always known the power of nature, how it can heal us and nurture us. This is why, in the beginning, yoga was only taught and practised outdoors.

"The word 'yoga' in Sanskrit means literally 'to yoke', often interpreted as 'union'. This unity is often considered as a union of body, mind and spirit. [But] for me this runs deeper; it is a unity with all living things."

Vedic philosophy, which established the foundations of yoga and its healing sister science, Ayurveda, regarded all life as sacred. Humans were just one brushstroke in the symbiotic masterpiece of life and consciousness. Scriptures such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad Gita* taught man to live in harmony with nature and to recognise the divinity in all elements, living and non-living.

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Paula Wild, director of operations and yoga instructor at Balanced Rock, a non-profit that runs nature-based yoga retreats and teacher trainings in California's Yosemite National Park, US, explains: "In a nutshell, we are nature. We are not separate. We are composed of the five elements, as is everything else: earth, water, fire, air, space.

"We are always forgetting this *and* we always have the potential to remember it, which brings us back to our true nature as spirit embodied."

Ayurveda holds that being out of sync with Mother Nature leads to unhappiness and illness. When we tune into her, the opposite occurs. And recent scientific studies agree.

Research from a variety of fields shows that physical activity in nature, such as hiking and gardening, and feelings of connection to nature, enhance psychological health and wellbeing. According to a Deakin University literature review, psychological benefits include improved mood, lower levels of anxiety, lower stress levels and lower levels of depression.

Honour your mother

Practising yoga in nature doesn't just nurture your inner ecosystem, though; it also makes you more likely to care for your external ones.

Practising presence

Diana Madisson Elliot of Dia Yoga shares five ways to integrate nature into your yoga practice.

- 1.** Start to feel your roots, the Earth supporting you and helping you ground. Bring your hands down to the Earth and feel its heartbeat, reconnecting and realigning your energies with the Earth.
- 2.** Listen to the sounds around you; focus your full awareness on the sounds of the birds, waves and wilderness.
- 3.** Next, feel the sun on your skin, the heat of the sun on the tip of your nose or shoulder. Feel the power of the sun that brings life and energy to the Earth.
- 4.** Feel the air moving across your body, possibly even focusing on a specific area, for example the back of the neck or hand.
- 5.** End with a gratitude practice, visualising your favourite natural place or most enjoyable surroundings. Feel how blessed you are to have that space in your life.



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According to yoga scholar Georg Feuerstein, PhD, “Yoga is intrinsically ecological ... As yoga scripture the *Bhagavad Gita* puts it, yoga is balance.” When you are inwardly balanced, you’re also balanced in the way you relate to your environment, he writes, pointing out how this is reflected in yoga’s ethical code.

“Non-harming (*ahimsa*) consists of reverence for all forms of life. Non-stealing (*asteya*) implies that we shouldn’t take more than we need for the upkeep of our body-mind.”

Greedlessness (*apigraha*), in an “eco-yogic” sense, asks that we respect the right of others to share the planet’s resources, while purity (*saucha*) can be interpreted as doing our best to minimise pollution and support efforts to clean up the environment.

Yoga is a powerful form of environmental stewardship, affirms Canadian yogi, surfer and Blissology founder, Eoin Finn. Meditation allows us to tap into “our wise guide inside”, he says, which acts as a moral compass. “It tells us in our bellies and in our chests when we are making decisions that harm life and when we are living in a way that is beneficial to life. It is the job

3 ways to ground down

Use these simple tips from Blissology’s Eoin Finn to stay centred every day.

1. Get quiet and calm. Relax your body and breathe tension out.
2. There is a vibration to nature that is calm and peaceful. It is slow and easeful. Tune into it. Don’t try to stop thinking, just tune into the beauty around you and let it fill your heart.
3. Put away your phone. I mean put it far away. Beautiful sunsets seem to be places where you take great selfies and, in the process, you miss a chance to awaken your higher self. So slow down and get introspective. The way I explain this is to put away your smartphone and open up your “heart phone”!

of yoga and spirituality to keep this side of us at the forefront of our consciousness.

“When we are in touch with this place, life ceases to merely be about the attainment of our own personal goals but about how we can work for the welfare of others as well ... When we have a spiritual practice, it makes us more reverent of all life.”

Given our ecological crises and public health concerns, if ever there was a time to reconnect with and honour nature, it’s now.

Go ... and flow

Yoga is a portable pursuit so it’s easy to practise outdoors. And, since Australia is blessed with untamed nature, engaging with it needn’t be expensive. Even in the largest of our cities, you’re never too far from a local park, beach, national park, creek or river.

Here are some ways to expand your practice into the wilds.

Take a yike

Have a lightweight yoga mat? Bring it along on your next bushwalk or camping trip so you can strike a pose whenever the mood hits.

There are other ways you can integrate your practice into a hike, as Wild shares. “While trekking in the mountains, I practise *pranayama* constantly. One breath, two steps — or whatever rhythm the terrain dictates.

“I also practise mindfulness by noticing where I place my foot on the Earth as I move, noting the way my posture shifts

on up- and downhill while carrying a backpack, and how the weight of that pack is distributed.”

Nature trails vary by length and difficulty, from short two-hour ambles to day hikes and arduous multi-day treks. When you’re choosing a walk, select one that will work for your fitness level and available spare time. And tell someone where you’re going and when you expect to be back.

What to pack

- **Water.** Carry adequate water to keep you hydrated — more if it’s hot.
- **Snacks.** Think lightweight, energy-dense foods such as nuts, fresh fruit and vegetables, dark chocolate and hummus.
- **Layers.** What you take depends on your route and the season, but lightweight woollen layers won’t let you down. If you’re camping or climbing to elevation, take thicker layers that will keep you warm once you stop moving.
- **Sun protection.** Sunscreen, a hat, a long-sleeved shirt and sunglasses are musts if you’re spending time outdoors.

Where to go

Beautiful hikes abound. To find them, ask your friends, join a hiking club or purchase a book on local trails. If you’d prefer the company of like-minded yoga lovers, you can also explore the options below.

At home

- **Radiance Retreats.** Supplement top-notch yoga classes focused on deep, slow *vinyasa* with meditation, hikes, beach walks and spa therapies in Byron Bay. radianceretreats.com
- **Dia Yoga.** Join an outdoor yoga class in Perth or go on monthly “yikes” through the stunning hills and beaches in and around Perth. dia-yoga.com

Abroad

- **Balanced Rock.** Experience backpacking journeys, weekend camping retreats, day hikes, workshops, yoga teacher trainings and transformational adventures in Yosemite National Park, US. balancedrock.org
- **Backcountry Yoga.** Combine hiking, yoga and your love for the natural world on an overnight camping adventure, ski retreat or hike in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and Colorado, US. backcountryyoga.com

Surf with soul

Surfing, like yoga, can help you feel connected to all. And it demands a balance of effort and ease, *sthira* and *sukham*, as you paddle out to catch a wave then relax into the ocean’s swell.

You benefit in other ways, too, says Madisson Elliot. “In my yikes, we take time to practise pranayama near running water, waterfalls or the ocean, where there are plenty of negative ions in the air. These negative ions assist to decrease blood pressure, relieve tension and help us recover from respiratory illnesses like colds and flu.”

Not a surfer? Sign up to a surf school or try another water sport such as stand-up paddleboarding, bodyboarding or kayaking. Or you can simply run, walk, move and meditate on the shore.

What to pack

- **Yoga mat.** A mat can improve your grip on Mother Earth — but it’s not essential. As Finn shares, “Any flat spot is good; I love doing yoga on sand or grass even more than on a mat.”
- **Blanket.** Blankets can help keep the chill away during meditation. You don’t need a cushion, though: simply build a “bum castle” in the sand, allowing you to raise your hips above your crossed legs and take a comfortable seat.
- **Surfboard (or SUP board or bodyboard).** Don’t have a board? Borrow one from a friend or hire one from a surf store.
- **Swimsuit, wetsuit and towel.** Take a dip before or after your practice to soak up the ocean’s invigorating energy.

Where to go

Australia boasts many beautiful beaches and stellar surf spots so finding somewhere to meditate beachside or while riding a wave, alone or with others, is easy. To explore new places, pick up a copy of *Wavefinder: Australia*, a pocket-sized guidebook that details more than 900 Aussie surf spots.

Looking to integrate your love of yoga with a surfing adventure further afield? Try one of these retreats on for size.

At home

- **Byron Yoga.** Beginner and experienced surfers alike can add surf lessons onto a three-day yoga retreat at the eco-friendly grounds of one of Australia’s longest-running yoga schools. byronyoga.com

Abroad

- **Soul & Surf.** Beautifully curated surf, yoga and massage experiences in India and Sri Lanka, as well as pop-up retreats in wave-pumping locations such as Portugal and Peru. soulandsurf.com
- **Surf Goddess Retreats.** A women's-only retreat in Bali where you can practise yoga, learn to surf or stand-up paddleboard in a positive, supportive environment. surfgoddessretreats.com
- **Yoga Ecology Surf Retreats.** Deepen your yoga practice, restore your positive mindset and fall in love with the ocean at a retreat in Canada or the US. blissology.com

Retreat and release

Do you love nature and yoga but also creature comforts? An eco-retreat may be for you. Run according to environmentally conscious principles, these retreat centres allow you to immerse yourself in a serene pocket of paradise without leaving a damaging footprint.

Urban yoga

Love your city too much to leave it? Here are creative ways to engage with urban green spaces:

- **Yoga by the Sea.** Flow through a *vinyasa* by Sydney's famous Bondi Beach, before diving into the surf to catch a few waves. yogabythesea.com.au
- **Fauna Yoga.** Salute the rising sun as you gaze over the treetops of South Yarra's Botanic Gardens. faunayoga.com.au
- **Rooftop Yoga.** Start your day with yoga, AstroTurf, palm trees, pink flamingos, retro caravans and Perth's city skyline. rooftop-yoga.com.au
- **Waterfront Yoga.** Breathe in the scent of the tropics with a free hatha yoga session at Darwin's waterfront. darwinyoga.com.au

Retreats typically offer many activities, from yoga to Pilates to cooking talks, but there's always time to commune with nature.

What to pack

- **Organic beauty products.** It's by no means essential but, if you're staying with environmentally friendly hosts, it's respectful to bring minimally invasive goods.
- **Journal.** You'll have time to reflect on retreat, so it's good to have a space where you can write down your thoughts and any brainwaves.
- **Comfortable clothes.** Whether you're inhaling the outdoors or reading in solitude, no-fuss garments will help you relax.

Where to go

More and more eco-retreats are popping up around Australia and abroad. Before you go, though, do your research to ensure that the operators are committed to sustainable practices.

At home

- **Billabong Retreat.** Perched amid the treetops overlooking a billabong 45 minutes from Sydney, this centre offers yoga, health, mindfulness and meditation retreats. billabongretreat.com.au
- **Krishna Village.** An eco-yoga community set on an organic farm in northern NSW, offering yoga, Reiki, massage, permaculture and self-development courses. krishnavillage-retreat.com

Abroad

- **The Yoga Farm.** A rustic yoga centre and sustainable-living project on Costa Rica's southernmost Pacific coast, designed for people looking to reconnect with mind, body and nature. yogafarmcostarica.org
- **Aro Hā.** Embrace a wellness adventure that combines yoga, Pilates, interval training and hiking in and around NZ's dramatic Southern Alps. aro-ha.com 