



BALANCING ACT Taking in the serene surrounds of Huvafen Fushi in the Maldives, above. Right: The overwater yoga pavilion at the same resort.

SPA GOER

BY JUDY CHAPMAN



GROWING UP IN A FAMILY OF HARD-CORE YOGA ENTHUSIASTS

was enlightening—but I can't say it was always fun. While my childhood friends were off skiing, my parents' idea of a vacation was to drag us off on pilgrimages through India, staying at ashrams with 4 a.m. wake-up calls, no-frills vegetarian meals, and interminable yoga and meditation sessions. It was in its way a rich, rewarding experience. And if you're one of those few dedicated to leading a spiritually balanced existence, yoga with a capital Y is probably still de rigueur. For most stressed-out urbanites, though—and these days that includes me—the barebones, monastic approach of traditional yoga retreats rarely equates with our notion of a hard-earned holiday. Thankfully, you no longer need to be an ascetic to enjoy the benefits of this ancient practice, as many a Hollywood celebrity will attest. Numerous luxury resorts have mastered the art of mixing self-discipline with self-indulgence, along the way placing their yoga mats in some absurdly inspirational settings, whether a podium hovering above the azure waters of the Maldives or a thatched pavilion overlooking a sacred Balinese river. So much for roughing it. Better still, while resort instructors are generally serious professionals (and sometimes celebrities in their own right), they welcome both novices and—dare I say it—a bit of fun.

The yoga master O.P. Tiwari has said, "Yoga teaches us to listen to the voice within." As accurate as that maxim may be, it doesn't preclude listening to some outside advice every once in a while. So herewith, our selection of the region's best yoga-friendly resorts, where posing and pampering go hand in hand (daily classes free except where noted).

Om Away from Home

You no longer need to be a hard-core ascetic to enjoy the benefits of yoga

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AUSTRALIA

At **Gwinganna**, a lifestyle retreat perched high above Queensland's Gold Coast, aspiring yogis and yoginis can practice their asanas (positions) in either a beautifully restored church—now the Heritage Spa—or an open-air pavilion surrounded by gum trees. Those wanting to up the aerobic ante should consider Gwinganna's three-day Yoga Hike retreat, which combines bush walks with organic cuisine and sessions on a hilltop yoga deck (61-7/5589-5000; www.gwinganna.com; doubles from US\$1,075 for two nights, all-inclusive; private instruction from US\$47).

BHUTAN

Uma Paro takes yoga to new heights—2,300 meters above sea level, to be precise. In a studio overlooking the terraced fields and pine forests of the Paro Valley, resident instructor Isabel Sebastien guides guests through the fluid movements of the Vinyasa Flow tradition; she also leads “yoga walks” to a lookout surrounded by prayer flags. Soaking in a warm herbal bath makes for the ultimate après yoga diversion (975-8/271-597; www.uma.como.bz; doubles from US\$250; private instruction from US\$47).

CHINA

Fuchun Resort, a striking 70-room, 17-villa retreat on the outskirts of Hangzhou,



ASSUME THE POSITION Clockwise from above: Meditating at Ananda in the Himalayas; a yoga session at the Farm at San Benito; Life Wellness Resort Quy Nhon. Opposite: The Yoga Barn at the Four Seasons Chiang Mai.

offers distractions aplenty, from an 18-hole golf course and well-equipped spa to views across the rolling countryside. Those who come for yoga won't be disappointed either; classes combine traditional techniques with Pranyama (breathing exercises) and meditation, and are given in a pavilion that looks out on a small lake

Celebrity Yoga Retreats Take your yoga to the next level with these high-profile yogis. **Louisa Sear**, the founder of Byron Bay's Yoga Arts teacher-training school, has been teaching internationally for more than two decades. From March 19–27, she will lead an eight-night retreat at Talalla Retreat on the southern shores of Sri Lanka (US\$1,110; www.yogarts.com.au). • Catch renowned Australian yogi **Don Peers** at Bali's Uma Ubud, a sister property of the Como Shambhala Estate at Begawan Giri, from March 12–17; the program includes five hours of daily yoga (Iyengar and Ashtanga styles), meditation, and philosophy classes (from US\$1,540; www.uma.como.bz). • Veteran practitioners **Beate McLatchie** and **Hiroshi Funakoshi** are on hand through March at the 20-villa Balé in Bali. They offer both private and group classes in Sivananda (a form of yoga that integrates breathing, movement, and meditation), Ashtanga, and Vinyasa Flow (www.thebale.com).

(86-571/6346-1111; www.fuchunresort.com; doubles from US\$254; group sessions from US\$32; private instruction from US\$50).

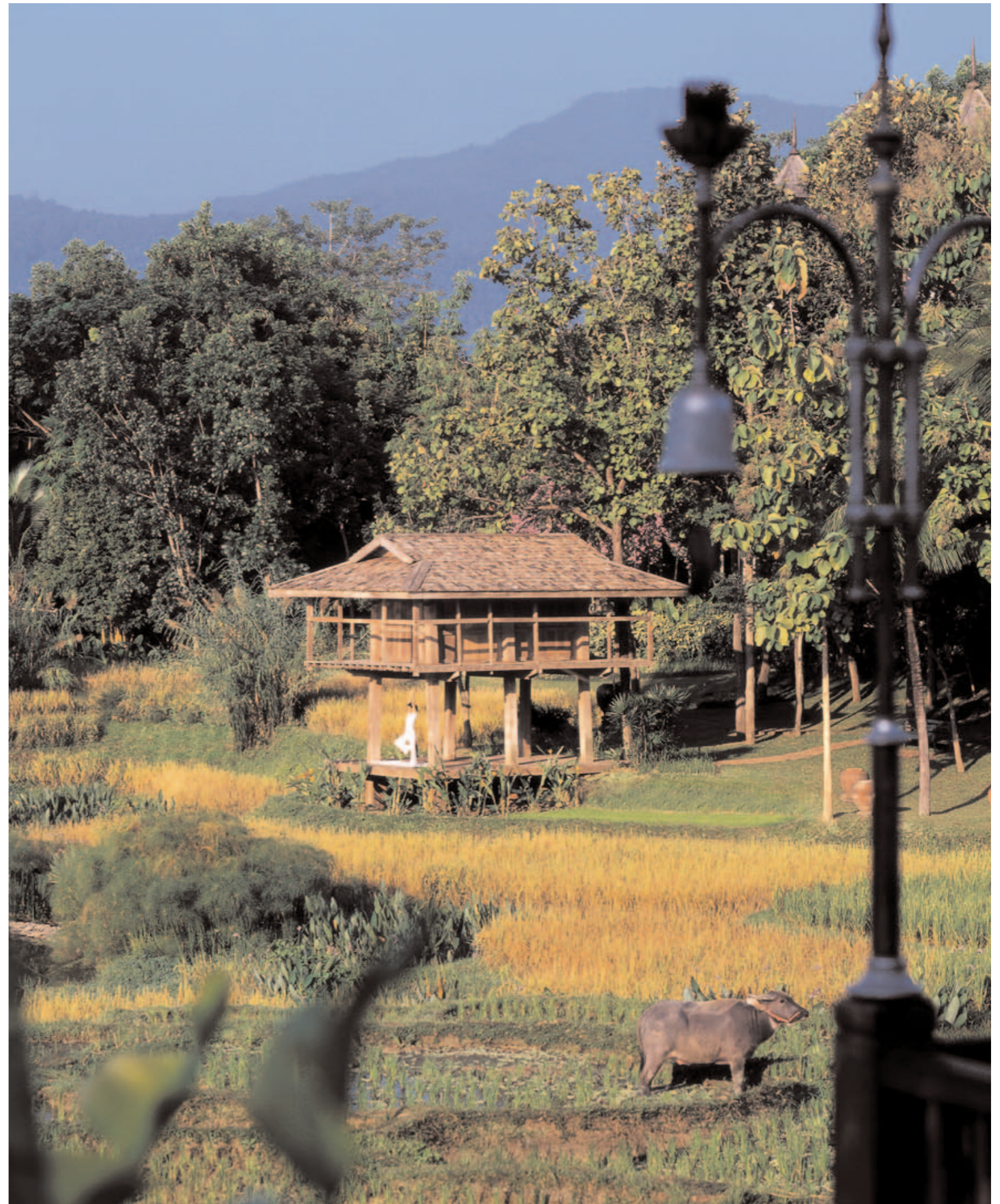
INDIA

A pink-sandstone oasis in Rajasthan's remote Alwar region, **Amanbagh** caters to both beginners looking to learn the fundamentals of yoga and experienced students wanting to brush up on their technique. Join an early-morning session on the rooftop terrace or trek 20 minutes to a yoga platform set above the shores of mystical Somsagar Lake; breakfast afterward is served in a nearby temple (65/6887-3337; www.amanresorts.com; doubles from US\$600; private instruction from US\$65).

Ananda in the Himalayas effortlessly combines pampering with deeper spiritual pursuits. Making the most of its setting, the palatial resort is located near the birthplace of yoga, overlooking the Ganges and the holy city of Rishikesh. Yoga classes focus on ancient techniques like Ashtanga—a vigorous form of hatha yoga—and are held in a great hall, a glass pavilion, or a hilltop garden. For diehards, instructors can also arrange private visits to some of Rishikesh's famed ashrams (91-1378/227-500; www.anandaspa.com; doubles from US\$430; private instruction from US\$45).

INDONESIA

The lush, pastoral foothills of central Bali seem almost custom-made for yoga and meditation, and more than a few resorts have taken this to heart. Among the best is **Como Shambhala Estate at Begawan Giri**, which occupies a narrow promontory above the Ayung River. A long-standing hideaway justly renowned for its superb accommodation and spring-fed pools, it became part of hotelier Christina Ong's Como Group in 1995 and has since seen the addition of a new yoga pavilion and spa complex overseen by a team of holistic specialists (62-361/978-888; www.cse.comoshambhala.bz; doubles from US\$495);





private instruction from US\$70).

Also in the Ubud area, the **Chedi Club at Tanah Gajah** invites guests to strike a pose in an open-air yoga studio built on the edge of rice fields. The instructor, Marcus, leads 90-minute stress-relieving classes each morning with relaxation and meditation exercises, and can tailor more challenging sessions on request (62-361/975-685; www.ghmhotels.com; doubles from US\$300; private instruction from US\$33).

THAILAND

Few spots will inspire your inner yogi as the Yoga Barn at the **Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai**. Salute the sunrise or meditate away the afternoon on the deck of this converted rice barn, which looks across rice fields and the verdant flanks of the Mae Rim Valley (66-53/298-181; www.fourseasons.com; doubles from US\$450; private instruction from US\$95).

A year-old "wellness sanctuary" on Koh Samui, **Kamalaya** offers both a palm-studded seaside location and some of the region's best holistic spa offerings. Between its in-house yoga workshops and program of retreats by world-renowned instructors, there's something for both

HIGHER PURSUITS The yoga studio at **Uma Paro** overlooks the terraced fields and pine forests of Bhutan's Paro Valley.

seasoned students and beginners. Privacy is not necessarily a priority, however: its mandala-inspired Yantra Hall can hold up to 120 guests (66-77/429-800; www.kamalaya.com; doubles from US\$325; group sessions from US\$15; private instruction from US\$47).

MALDIVES

Huvafen Fushi, which occupies a coral-fringed isle in the North Malé Atoll, generated considerable buzz when it opened in 2004 with the world's first underwater spa room. But it also has an incredibly gorgeous yoga pavilion, where you can unroll your mat surrounded by jade-green waters and powdery white beaches. The spa's signature Quintessential

Yoga in the City City hotels have gotten into the yoga act as well. In Hong Kong, the **Landmark Mandarin Oriental** (Landmark Bldg., 15 Queen's Rd., Central; 852/2132-0188; www.mandarinoriental.com; doubles from US\$360) holds several daily classes (including Level 2 Ashtanga) at its expansive spa and fitness center. Try the Yoga Experience, which combines a private one-hour yoga class with use of their water therapy pools and lunch at the Spa Café. • Every room at Bangkok's chic **Metropolitan** (27 South Sathorn Rd.; 66-2/625-3333; www.metropolitan.como.bz; doubles from US\$240) comes with a yoga mat, and complimentary yoga classes are held twice a day, tailored to guests' levels. Afterward, head to Glow for a shot of wheatgrass or book one of the spa's fabulous Guinot facials to enhance your inner glow. • The Seven Eden Wellness Centre is a new addition to Spa Botanic, the tropical-garden spa at **The Sentosa** in Singapore (2 Bukit Manis Rd., Sentosa Island; 65/6275-0331; www.thesentosa.com; doubles from US\$244). It offers yoga and tai chi alongside an herbal bar, a high-tech gym, and a Traditional Chinese Medicine clinic. • The rooftop deck at the **W Seoul-Walkerhill's** (21 Gwangjang-dong, Gwangjin-gu; 82-2/465-2222; www.wseoul.com; doubles from US\$295) Away Spa offers serene views of the Han River.

Aquum treatment includes a yoga session prior to massage (960/664-4222; www.huvafenfushi.com; doubles from US\$850; group sessions from US\$20; private instruction from US\$70).

MALAYSIA

A private, forest-clad island and a sprawling seaside spa complex make **Pangkor Laut Resort** a first-class yoga destination. There's an Ayurvedic yoga instructor on hand, and early risers will want to sign up for the Early Bird program, which includes a yoga session, spa treatment, and breakfast (60-5/699-1100; www.pangkorlaut.com; doubles from US\$275; group sessions from US\$15; private instruction from US\$68).

PHILIPPINES

Yoga is a daily ritual at the **Farm at San Benito**, a renowned raw-food detox retreat where the house philosophy is "let food be thy medicine." But this is more sybaritic sanctuary than old-fashioned fat farm, with meditation huts and sumptuous villas scattered across nine hectares of lush, landscaped grounds. Devotees travel from all over the region to partake in eight-day retreats that include vegan cooking classes and evening spa treatments; a series of 21-day yoga teacher training workshops will be launched soon (63-2/696-3795; www.thefarm.com.ph; doubles from US\$98; private instruction from US\$10).

VIETNAM

Bounded by a private beach on Vietnam's south-central coast, the 63-room **Life Wellness Resort Quy Nhon** is an idyllic spot to practice yoga, tai chi and Pilates. Accommodation in Cham-inspired guest rooms overlooking two outlying islands adds to the wellness experience (84-56/840-132; www.life-resorts.com; doubles from US\$132; private instruction from US\$35). ☺