

WHY GO TO INDIA?

For many Australian yogis, their yoga journey is not complete until they have made a sojourn to the birthplace of yoga. Recently returned Indian explorer, Lauren Tober, asks why.

Desikachar, the founder of the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram in Chennai, when asked why Westerners should travel to India to study yoga, replied, “No reason at all.” When asked why Western students continued to do so anyway, he was quoted as saying, “Because they are mad.” With 45-degree heat, and a country that can be smelly and dirty, Desikachar did not understand why foreigners would leave their beautiful countries to come to India, especially when they were not guaranteed a wonderful experience of yoga.

As Desikachar predicted, there were times during my stay in India when I felt I must be mad. I found myself up at 5.30 in the morning, heading for asana class, after a sleepless night due to the unenviable combination of electricity

and fan failure, impenetrable heat, dogs barking, tummy pain, and aching muscles. After an hour of chanting mantras that I did not understand, I felt more than a little mad – I felt delirious. I remember writing emails to my family and friends and thinking, no one back home is going to believe this.

So why go to India? We have an abundance of talented and inspiring yoga teachers in Australia, as well as a plethora of professional yoga teacher training programs. We have yoga and other spiritual ashrams scattered throughout the country, and visiting teachers from India. Any yogi will tell you that the spiritual journey is an internal one, and that travelling around the world probably won't get you any closer to enlightenment, if indeed that is what you are seeking. I decided to talk to a number of yoga practitioners who have made the journey to India to gain some insight into their motivations as aspiring Australian yoga students or teachers.





The vision that is India

Michael de Manincor, of the Yoga Institute in Sydney, first travelled to India in 1998 on a holiday, and chanced upon a government-sponsored international yoga conference in Rishikesh. Michael now returns to India regularly to study with his teacher, Desikachar, taking his young family, and occasionally his students with him. Interestingly, Desikachar at first refused to be Michael's teacher, advising him to find someone in his own culture to teach him.

Michael believes that there is something special about the experience of going back to the source of yoga. He says that while we have great teachers in Australia, India provides what he calls an 'authentic' yoga experience, as well as the possibility of studying with some of the world's great yoga masters, such as BKS Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois (now deceased) and Desikachar, to name a few.

Leanne Davis, who also studied with Desikachar, has travelled to India five times. Leanne agrees with Desikachar's stance that it is not necessary to travel to India to learn yoga, although at the time of Leanne's training, the courses she wished to take were only available in India. While Leanne would have happily stayed in Australia for her studies, each of her trips to India

exceeded her expectations, and created lifelong changes. "I love the immersion of studying yoga in its cultural context," says Leanne. "I have gained insights into the teachings from being immersed in the cultural context of the teachings and the language." Some of the areas of Leanne's life that changed as a result of her Indian immersion included self-discipline, selflessness, service, and a respect for authority and tradition.

One of the unexpected consequences of the popularity of travelling to India by Westerners, says Leanne, is that "it has helped to keep the science of yoga alive and flourishing in India. Many of the younger generations of Indians are not so interested in the practices of old, but are seeking the fruits of the West."

Swami Dayananda, the Director of the Adelaide Shiva Yoga Meditation Centre, first travelled to India 30 years ago. She returned this year with a group of students and associates from her centre. Dayananda describes yoga in India as being about "feeling the shakti." She regards the spiritual energy she experiences there as an extraordinary experience. "The Indian people can be gracious and generous, especially when it comes to sharing their great spiritual heritage."

While Dayananda speaks passionately and vividly about her time in India, she does not believe that it is essential

to travel to there to have an authentic experience of yoga. She says that in the West we have everything we need for our yoga practice, and that while India is fun, it is also very challenging and not for everyone. Dayananda says that travelling in India is much harder than most people expect. If you are ill, have any dietary restrictions, or cannot stand dust, dirt, or poverty, she recommends enjoying Indian culture from the comfort of home.

On the day of 9/11, Emma Grant, now of Red Tent Yoga in Byron Bay, was an Australian expat living and practicing yoga in New York City. Her apartment was across from the World Trade Centre Twin Towers and when her building was hit, she was unable to return home for several months. This event propelled Emma on a spiritual path to India. "We saw this as a message that it was time to leave New York and we were ready for a spiritual pilgrimage in search of universal answers," she says. Emma chose India due to her long standing connection with yoga, as well as newfound passion for ayurveda, and her desire to return to the source of these two great practices. From a practical standpoint, Emma also wanted to study yoga intensively over an extended period of time, and she felt that being in India was a cost effective and accessible way to do this.

While Emma chose to travel to India to study yoga and ayurveda, she says "Yoga is about the teacher and teachings" and she believes that you can have a profound experience of yoga anywhere in the world. "However, I feel that there is something special about yoga's place of origin, and that the vibration of yoga is somehow stronger in India, where the daily rituals have been passed from guru to student for thousands of years. India helps us 'to find stillness amongst chaos', to find peace amongst suffering, and to literally rise above pain and ignorance."

The harsh physical conditions in India seem to propel at least some inhabitants to take their mind to a higher place, whether that is with yoga, faith, or devotion to a guru or God. "Finding that sense of serenity inside oneself is the

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only way to survive there,” says Emma. Sydney’s Tamsin Sarasvati, from *Yoga in Daily Life*, echoed this sentiment. “I feel clean, inside and outside, even though I’m quite dusty. My clothes were never quite clean while I was there. But I would always come back with a sense that I’d purified myself somehow, that I’d burned something, that I’d taken a spiritual step forward. I’m also struck by the teachers that I encountered – how they can be happy regardless of their outer circumstances.” Comparing the experience she has in India with what she encounters in Australia, Tamsin comments, “In India, there are no questions about what you are doing. The Western rules fall away. It’s like a social freedom there. In the Indian ashrams I visit, people there are living austere lives. But in Australia, you always have a choice. And choice can actually lead to greater stress than not having a choice.”

Noush Baxter, a Brisbane yoga teacher, first travelled to India for pleasure, and found yoga in the process. Noush was drawn to yoga through experiencing the spiritual energy of India. “In India, spirituality is part of their everyday life. It’s not an add-on. You can’t help but open up to spirituality to some extent. I didn’t go there looking for spirituality, but the integral role spirituality plays in Indian culture makes it difficult to not open up to it while you are there.” Noush also recalls the vibrancy, and what she called, the ‘sensory overload’ of India. “Compared to the colourful environment of India, the rest of the world seems black and white.”

Finding a guru in India

“There’s a lot of shonky yoga in India,” says Michael de Manincor. “Yoga is now a draw card to get international dollars into the country. I’d recommend doing your homework before you leave Australia. Talk to others who have trodden the path before you. Speak to other students and teachers about their experiences in India to help you plan your journey.” Some Indian teachers who cater to international students have websites and may even provide contacts for previous students whom you can email and ask about their experiences.



Jordan Thackray, of *Finding Lotus* in Sydney, travelled to India to become a yoga teacher. When he arrived in Mysore, he found the teacher he hoped to study with was actually in New Zealand. “So I took another path, which is very much like me, and it turned out perfectly,” Jordan says. Jordan’s advice for finding your way in India is to follow your nose and not the Lonely Planet guide, and to be smart, but not afraid to try new things.

As Jordan discovered, teachers and gurus regularly travel around India and internationally. If you have your heart set on studying with a particular teacher, it is wise to check that the teacher will be in residence when you are planning to visit. It is also important to check the rules of the shala or ashram, and make

sure you are happy to live by these while you are there. Some teachers offer live-in accommodation, and others require you to find your own place to stay. Live-in accommodation, particularly ashrams, often asks students to adhere to strict rules, including eating only vegetarian food, no stimulants (e.g. alcohol, coffee, cigarettes), modest clothing, waking and going to bed early, periods of silence, no sexual activity, an extended stay and regular asana, meditation, pranayama, chanting, satsang, and community work.

Remember, India has the capacity to thwart the best-laid plans, and can send you on an altogether different internal and external journey. And perhaps that’s part of the journey you are meant to have!

Avoiding spiritual blight

Psychologist Daniel Goleman provides some practical tips when looking for a spiritual teacher in his article, Early warning signs for the detection of spiritual blight. Some of the things Goleman cautions to be wary of include the following: Are there any taboo topics, or secrets that only an inner circle is privy to? Can you witness stereotypical behaviour, such as people who walk, talk, eat, and dress just like their leader? Does the party line override how people actually feel? Is there a shared delusion of grandeur that there is no way but this one? Is there a belief that you will be 'lost' if you leave the group? Are there any 'graduates', i.e., does anyone ever leave the group? Is a single worldview used to explain anything and everything? Finally, is irreverence allowed? Laughing at sacred cows can be good for your health.

Emma shares a valuable piece of advice from Krishnamacharya, "When you think you have found your guru, don't close both eyes blindly ... always keep one eye open."

When to go

India is such an enormous and diverse country that there is no single best time to go. There are three seasons: hot, wet, and cool. The hot season begins around February and peaks around April or May. In central India, temperatures up to 45 degrees are not uncommon. By June, monsoon season sets in, adding humidity to the heat. The monsoon begins in the south of India in early June and passes through the country to the north in early July. In October, the monsoon comes to an end for most of India and the temperature begins to drop. November to March are the cooler months and are a popular time to travel. In the far south, the temperature becomes comfortably warm, whereas the north becomes decidedly chilly.

Visas

To get a six-month Indian tourist visa, you will need a passport valid for at least six months, a passport sized photograph, a copy of your air ticket or itinerary (showing date of entry and

What to Take:

- Water bottle and filter (no plastic bottles to leave behind)
- Mosquito repellent and net
- Long clothes that are not revealing (for women and men)
- A sticky yoga mat (these are not readily available in India)
- Portable clothes line (for clothes and yoga mats)
- High potency probiotics
- Electrolytes to replenish energy and avoid dehydration
- Small first aid kit
- Sunscreen and a hat
- Money belt
- Camera
- Earplugs for noisy nights and long bus rides
- Small torch
- Shoes that are easily removed for entering houses, temples, shalas, and ashrams
- Talk to your health provider about vaccinations and medications

From a couple of seasoned travellers to Indian ashrams:

- "Travel light and pack mosquito repellent, your spirit of adventure, and a whole lot of patience."
- "Pack light - you can always buy clothes and you never know when your bus will break down and you have to walk. Also, in an ashram, you are generally sharing a room with several others, and thus it is good to stay quite contained in your personal possessions."





departure from India), and \$75 plus various charges. Go to www.vfs-in-au.net for more detailed information. The visa is valid from the date of issue, so consider timing the application process several weeks before you plan to leave Australia. Yoga visas are also available for students with an admission letter from a recognised Indian institution. Check to see if the shala you are intending to visit requires a tourist or a yoga visa.

Sit back and enjoy the ride

India is confronting, challenging and downright frustrating at times. Yet every year, many Australians travel to India and fall in love with the country, its people, and its vibrant spirituality. And, as Swami Dayananda suggests, "If you do decide to go, be open and you will fly in the face of reality, live on the edge, and have the most wonderful experience."

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Lauren is a yoga teacher, psychologist, and photographer. She is looking forward to the day her young son stops eating everything he picks up off the ground so she can take him to India. To contact Lauren or to see more photography from her trips to India, visit www.laurentober.com.

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