

Journeys through

India

Pilgrimages of Western Yoginis

By Shurna Robbins

Collision Course with India

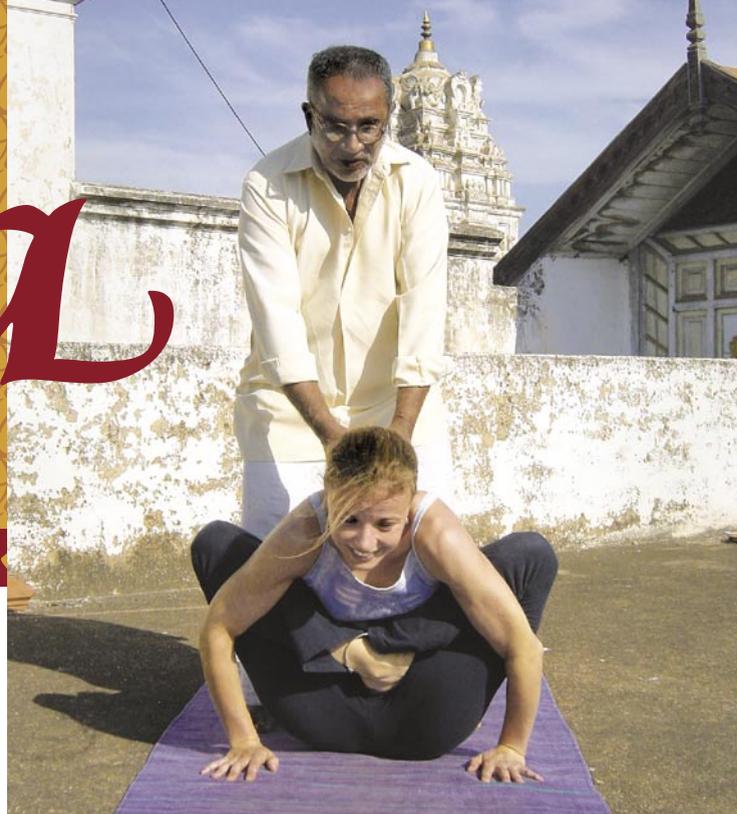
Kirsten Germann felt confident on her motor scooter, swerving in and out of mid-day traffic. Humanity, bicycles, rickshaws, lorries, buses, and animals converged in haphazard directions. After two months, the traffic in India no longer terrified her. The smell of jasmine, curry, and cow dung was now familiar and comforting. Kirsten was on her way to the repair shop. It was one of those stories: “Madam, come back next week. Come back next week.” It was her tenth time coming back. Then she hit the cow.

The cow stepped into the road. Kirsten was going too fast to maneuver around it. Motor scooter and cow collided—knocking her to the pavement, gravel grinding into her skin. Indians descended upon her calling “Madam, Madam.” In the crowded streets of Mysore, everyone wanted to help. Embarrassed and dazed, she just wanted to go home.

Kirsten was fortunate, she was scratched up a bit, road rash on her arms and legs, but otherwise unhurt. The cow, unfazed, standing solid in the road, did not notice the commotion of people or the motor scooter being pulled to the side of the road.

Indians believe bumping into a cow is auspicious, bringing good luck. The cow incident became a turning point. Kirsten had intended to grow her yoga practice, delve deeper into Indian philosophy, discover her spirituality, and work on her art. Social activities and visitors had distracted her, taking too much time away from her purpose in India.

“I was feeling a bit sorry for myself,” says Kirsten. “I had come here to get into my own space. Then I bumped into the cow. It was like, ‘You are not going out, you are just staying home to heal yourself.’ It pushed me into my own space. I started painting; I started meditating.”



Above:
Kirsten studying with BNS
Iyengar—the other Iyengar.

Left:
Dominique’s afternoon yoga
practice in Thailand.

Below:
Heather on practical
transportation in India.



This was not Kirsten’s first time to India. Eight years ago and fresh out of acupuncture school, she had come with her boyfriend. She had wanted to travel, and see where yoga came from. “India was calling me,” she explains.

Everywhere the couple traveled—on trains and buses, beaches and streets—Kirsten was followed, leered, touched, and groped. The noise, the crowds calling, shouting, trailing her down the streets, all to buy, to beg, and to hustle. Kirsten had become infected with amoeba, worms, and giardia, an intestinal parasite. It would take five years to fully recover.

But India was more than aggravations. India was about religion, as real today as it was 5,000 years ago. Still dark before sunrise, men pray at Hindu shrines in the streets, in the temples, and in their homes. Throughout the city, a voice calls faithful Muslims to prayer. In Buddhist monasteries, monks recite ancient texts.

“This country is saturated with gods and spirituality. Everything is geared toward God in a way that is completely alien to us,” says Kirsten. “You can get the philosophy from books, but in terms of experience there is something here that you cannot get in the West.”

She found B.K.S. Iyengar, an old Hindu, in a dusty temple in Mysore. His head was bald except for a tuft. A cotton dhoti draped around his waist and white ash decorated his forehead—the conventional dress of the Brahmin caste. As a young man, Iyengar had studied under yoga master Krishnamacharya in that same temple. He had been teaching for over forty years. His whole life was devoted to yoga.

That first day in the temple his only students were Indian. Kirsten wondered if he would teach a Western woman. Then Kirsten introduced herself. Iyengar said, “So, you want to see God?” Well, actually, Kirsten had come to do some exercise.

Studying Ashtanga Vinyasa in a temple where thousands of people have studied before her and where people worship every day, transformed her yoga from exercise to a practice that included *pranayama*, *mudras*, meditation, *kriyas*, and philosophy.

Now, on her third trip, Kirsten starts practice at 6:00 a.m. continuing for three and one half hours of asana, *pranayama*, and meditation. “I like the flow, it moves like a dance. I like to enter that flow. It becomes a beautiful thing, on a good day.” In today’s fast-paced lifestyle, committing three and one half hours seems impossible. Kirsten explains, “In Europe, it’s easy to get distracted, making a cup of tea, work, friends, and everything going on around you. But when you go away, you give yourself space that you don’t have when you are at home.”

There are only a few old Brahmins left teaching traditional yoga in India. “They are part of a dying species. When this generation goes, a lot of knowledge will go with them,” says Kirsten. “I would like to learn as much as I can and keep some of this knowledge alive in this world.”

Navigating Through Gurus

Heather A.J. Morton was destined to become famous. Beautiful and smart, Heather won the Ms. Teen Canada pageant. Her high school classmates named her “Most Likely to be on *The Young and the Restless*” and everyone believed she was going to be a star. A modeling and acting career followed until her mid-twenties when she realized that something was not right—she didn’t like the way her life was going.

Not sure what she was going to do with the rest of her life, Heather left it all behind to teach English in Korea, where she happened to pick up a book on yoga therapy by Sonia Richmond. Trying out a few postures illustrated in that book, she started practicing and teaching. Still, she had no idea that yoga would change her life, with a life mission that integrated her energy and intellect, and, at the same time, challenged the hunger within.

Two years later, she went to Sivananda Yoga teacher training in Southern India. Life in the ashram was very much like life in a monastery: blackout at 7:00 p.m., meditation at 4:30 a.m., six hours of classes and practice, cold showers, squat toilets and group meals.

“I was seeking more individual instruction because I was in groups of 30 to 70 people,” says Heather. “I realized you can grow a lot more if it’s on a one-on-one basis. That’s why I was seeking out teachers.” She heard about Ashtanga Vinyasa, a vigorous asana series, and traveled to Mysore to study with Pattabhi Jois, another student of Krishnamacharya.

Celebrities like Madonna and Sting, avid practitioners of Ashtanga Vinyasa, had brought Jois into the limelight. Westerners were coming from all over the world to study with him. His yogashala could only fit 12 students so he staggered time slots to accommodate the growing numbers. Heather’s slot was 4:30 a.m.

The next teacher Heather found was Venkatesh, a young man, teaching back bending courses and achieving amazing results for the inflexible Westerner back. “I kept building upon my practice and my studies and taking more programs,” says Heather. “Even in the final advanced poses, my students ask, ‘How can you go any further than that?’ But, there is always a further than that, though it might not be just purely physical.”

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Heather smiles as she reflects back over the years. “As I move forward and look back at this person in Korea teaching yoga, I really laugh. Even with all my experience, the more I learn, the more I don’t know. The more I have experienced, the more I know there is yet more to experience.”

Heather has been making her annual pilgrimage to India for five years. She closes her yoga studio in Toronto for two months to study under her teachers. On the surface it is a sacrifice. Shutting down the studio is not good for business, and being away from home and her partner is lonely. “There is an ache there but two months go by so quickly. I am going home in a week and where did those two months go?”

Reconciling Her Nomadic Spirit

Dominique Renucci has been working in Asia for years, combining her two passions—travel and yoga. Dominique knows what she is doing. Twenty-four years ago she flew over a car in a motorcycle accident, leading to years of paralysis, pain, and medical treatments. Today, at 51, a mother of two and grandmother of four, she has the muscle tone and strength of a woman half her age. Take a yoga class from Dominique and you quickly realize her class is not about relaxation or chanting. It is about conditioning muscles through hard, sweaty work.

It all started in 1991 when Dominique took a holiday to Nepal. “In the taxi, between the airport and the city center, something happened inside me. I knew I was going to leave all I had, and change my life in an absolute way,” says Dominique. “It was not something like a flash. It was a deep and quiet feeling. At the end of my holiday, I went back to France, resigned, and told everyone—lover, husband, and children—that I was no longer going to stay in France. I planned to leave everything. Only my children believed me.”

Dominique traveled to Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet, Afghanistan and China. “I lived on my savings for a while, with the lowest budget in the world, indifferent to comfort. You get used to it; you learn how to relax in a packed Indian bus on horrible roads. You learn to ignore the uproar in streets, in guesthouses. You learn to drink any water without being sick. You learn to spend days without being able to wash, resisting the temptation to scratch. Your body accepts more and more things. Then life becomes living spirituality. Instead of meditating on a cushion, you meditate everywhere.”

Dominique has been practicing yoga on and off for 25 years. It was while she was in India that yoga became an integral part of her life. She attended both traditional and teacher-intensive retreats. “I was soon able to keep the discipline and practice wherever I was, from guesthouses to dormitories for backpackers.” Again and again, Dominique returned to Nepal and Pakistan to renew her India visa.

“What I got in India was the spiritual life; it’s omnipresent like nowhere else in the world. But for the teaching skills, the precision of the postures, the anatomy studies, there is nothing like the Western schools.”

Dominique currently teaches in Thailand. Her dream is to lead intensive yoga-retreats with pranayama, asana, meditation, and satsang from India to Bali. “It’s only when I went to Asia by chance that it all became clear. I know now that I can’t settle. I can’t work in an office. I can’t have a family life. I am a nomadic yoga teacher. That’s all.”

If India is Calling You

For women thinking of studying yoga in India, Heather advises, “India isn’t for everybody. If you really want to go, you will find a way to go. If you have children, bring them with you. If you have a husband, leave him at home. If you have a job, arrange for a leave of absence. If you are afraid of being lonely, build the courage to be on your own.”

Kirsten recommends, “Looking around initially, finding someone who you can connect to that you think is real. It might not be some old guy with a long beard.”

Kirsten, Heather and Dominique are yoga teachers. They are also women with children, husbands, homes, jobs and businesses. Their paths are sometimes littered with loneliness, mishap and illness. They uncovered a force within, beyond postures, beyond travel to self-awareness, spirituality, and life purpose. They remind us all of the possibilities—to pursue our dreams, our desires, our hopes.

In that old temple, Kirsten has practiced hundreds of hours and still continues her journey. “This time I thought about whether or not I wanted to meet God and I decided I am ready,” says Kirsten. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

Shurna Robbins is a New Orleans based freelance writer. It was during her yoga pilgrimage to India that she was inspired to write Journeys Through India. (www.shurna.com)