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FEEL THE GLOW

Any outdoor spot can feed your energy—no need for post-card perfection.

Yoga under the sun

Of all the twists on this age-old practice, none may boost its potency more than simply taking your poses outside.

By SARA ANGLE

There's a beautiful thing that happens when you leave the confines of the yoga studio—the walls come down, mentally as well as physically. “Fresh air encourages people to breathe a little easier, and being outside feels less confining, which often results in people stretching more deeply and opening their bodies more freely,” says Rebecca Weible, the founder of Yo Yoga in New York City, which offers classes outside.

The benefits extend down to the ground you're standing on. If you're practicing on grass or sand, the uneven surface may make it harder to balance, but the stability challenge can strengthen your core and leg muscles, Weible says. The nonuniform terrain also forces you to pay more attention to your alignment, she says, which helps you maintain focus and connect to something greater than yourself.

“We're all linked to the environment, so being in nature helps us understand our own mind-body connection,” says Mantas Zvinas, a yoga instructor and the founder of SurfYogaBeer, a company that hosts yoga and fitness retreats. Inspired? Here are three ways to flow outside.

Take class alfresco

When the weather gets mild, your local yoga studio or park service may host outdoor sessions. Visit its website or check with a nearby Lululemon store, which also leads free fresh-air classes (info.lululemon.com/stores).

Tapping into regular outdoor classes will encourage you to make it a habit, which only increases the good-for-you factor: A weekly fix of nature for 30 minutes or more was associated with fewer cases



of depression and high blood pressure, according to a recent study in the journal *Scientific Reports*.

To tune out distractions when the park is buzzing, focus on one sound, like the birds chirping or the sway of branches, says Susan Park, the founder of Spark Yoga in Fairfax, Virginia, which hosts freebie outdoor sessions.

Go on a retreat

Sometimes it takes a vacation to find the time to devote to yoga, says Allison Sobel, a yoga and meditation teacher in the Philadelphia area who leads retreats all over the world. If you're just looking for pure Zen, check out stateside yoga centers like Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health (kripalu.org) in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and Omega Institute (eomega.org) in Rhinebeck, New York, which take their classes into nature during warmer months. If you want a side of sightseeing with your yoga, retreat companies such as Yogascapes (yogascapes.com) and

SurfYogaBeer (surfyogabeer.com) lead trips to locations like India, Italy, Nicaragua, and Scotland.

Each place has a different energy and vibe, Sobel says. For example, if you're by the ocean, you'll feel a vastness and a sense of awe and get a dose of “blue mind” (what scientists dub the calming effect that kicks in when we're near water), while being in the mountains can make you feel more grounded.

Flow on your own

Practicing solo gives you the freedom to go at your own pace, work on your favorite asanas, and pause when you want to just chill and take in your surroundings. Find a spot that seems the most peaceful or scenic. It could be your backyard, or you might hike along a trail to reach a tranquil place or head to a local stream so you can hear the water. Since there is no instructor's voice to break the spell of nature, you can really make your flow a moving meditation. Says Sobel: “Yoga is about not only the physical body but using the senses within the physical body to go deeper.” Especially during the early fall, you'll feel the transition of the seasons, she says.

To make it a peak experience, go matless. “Direct contact with nature—like having your bare feet in the grass—can add a sensory element to your practice, possibly heightening your connection with nature,” says Katrina M. Brown, Ph.D., who studies the relationship between well-being and outdoor experiences. With a high like that, you may never hit the mat again. ★

POSE GOALS

A change in environment gets you out of your headspace and can push you to try new poses or provide a breakthrough on one you've been working on, Weible says.

Nature can really turn on your senses for a deeper mind-body connection.