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You can't really call yourself a typical middle-aged woman until you've considered fleeing home to do a Yoga retreat in Bali. Somewhere between hearing Elizabeth Gilbert talk of finding herself and seeing Julia Roberts cycling through rice fields, this holistic escape became a rite of passage. The relentless grind of feeding a tribe of children, the struggle to juggle a wholesome life and a career, the discovery that you've married a monster; modern problems are solved with ancient wisdom.

But along the way, certain roadblocks prevent some of us from actually undertaking the odyssey, and it sits in the "someday" dream bank awaiting more freedom, more time and more money. For many, it might be the (completely crazy) thought that a certain level of deservedness is required in order to abandon all commitments for a week or so to realign with sanity. For others, there's probably a dash of fear about what it's actually like. After all, Yoga is a rapidly evolving practice that has acquired a few strange stereotypes over the years.

Even if you practice Yoga a few times a week, you've probably wondered if you'll need to know about Chakras and Doshas to converse properly over dinner. You may have even imagined yourself spending a day "channeling your spirit animal". Or perhaps you've just feared you'll be the only person not inked up in Hindu symbols. All this in a foreign country.

To shed a little light on the matter, we took to the valleys of Ubud with Oneworld Retreats for a weeklong Yoga escape. The banquet of Yoga holidays in Bali feels endless, but this one presented itself as a perfect middle ground; well priced with a little bit of Balinese culture and absolutely no sign of fasting.



Retreating to the valleys of Ubud – the lush setting of Oneworld Retreats.

Down to business: The Yoga

Most Yoga classes will hit the perfect sweet spot of being not too easy and not too tough for at least one person in the room, but it's quite an art form to satisfy a full studio. The Oneworld's "Escape the World" itinerary offers a practice of "daily **meditation** and soft yoga", singing harmoniously to beginners, but possibly scaring off those looking for a vigorous challenge.

Cushioned into a lively valley that whistled with wildlife, our open air Yoga space looked the vision of peace. This was the place we would spend three and a half hours per day finding new physical limits, searching for stillness and manipulating our muscles with the assistance of the humid Bali air. Birds and squirrels entertained our morning classes and fireflies and silent lightning lit up the evenings.

Our guru for the week, Iyan Yaspriyana, managed the artful guidance of our full spectrum of experience levels, offering chairs to those still finding their way into the folds of downward facing dog and precisely adjusting other students into advanced variations.



Down to business – 6 days, 16 hours on the mat. Image via Oneworld Retreats

The teacher is without question one of the most important factors in finding a connection to a Yoga session, which only adds to the daunt of taking your practice overseas. Iyan's harmonic voice drifted across our mats; he reminded us not to feel angry with ourselves when we couldn't master a certain posture, he assured us he could feel the pain too, and he made analogies between our bodies and strings on guitars. With an infectious smile and enchanting wisdom, it seemed the whole class wanted to pack Iyan into their suitcase and take him back home.

During our introduction, a few fearful gasps were heard after the reminder that we would be woken at 6:30am every day, and would spend a full 16 hours on our Yoga mats in the short space of 6 days. For many, this was more than the sum total of their whole life's Yoga experience. Although we reached the finish line with shaky legs and firmer abs, there was a sense of agreement that the sweet spot had been experienced by all, and the hours of practice were just right. With not a single person missing a single class, our actions spoke louder than words.



Iyan's Yoga shrine. Image via Samantha Chalker

The joy of an all-inclusive

If anything about the itinerary sounded a little off putting, it was the additional activities sitting amongst days already filled by – yes, let's hear it again – 3.5 hours of Yoga. Except, of course, for the two included spa treatments, those activities sounded perfectly manageable. Yet somehow, in the spirit of group retreating, the **half-day bicycle excursion** and the guided rice field walk became not just manageable, but wonderful. The distraction of absorbing local villages, spotting distant **volcanoes** and dining at **Sari Organik**, Bali's original **rice field restaurant**, made the schedule execute to perfection. The entire week's calendar flowed to a carefully considered rhythm, with the most strenuous day following on from a full **day of silence**, in which watercolour painting and crafting flower mandalas were the filling of the day.



Mandala painting: just another day on Yoga Retreat in Ubud. Image via Samantha Chalker

The skilful traveller might think they can craft a DIY Yoga retreat with all the same activities for slightly less money (repeat: slightly less), but excursions like the purification ritual at **Tirta Empul temple** prove otherwise. We drove into the night to ponds filled by fountains built in 962 A.D., still streaming with the fresh holy water of **Sungai Pakerisan River**. Wrapped in ceremonial style garb and holding our flower offerings and burning incense sticks, we soaked up the chanting of our **Hindu priest**. Each of us submerged into what felt like freezing waters – the contrast of our balmy days – and followed the prayer rituals handed down to us, soaking our heads under the gushing waters of almost 20 fountains. Our efforts were rewarded with hot tea, cacao balls and fresh fruit.



The nighttime purification ritual at Tirta Empul Temple. Image via Samantha Chalker

Feeding the senses ... with food

We were encouraged to rise every morning with the use of our senses. To feel the warmth of the sheets, let our feet connect with the cool of the tiles, listen for birds, and feel the rain of our showers drip on our back. As gratifying as it was, it simply couldn't compete with the pleasure shown to our sense of taste.

The website said little more than "well balanced meals," setting our expectations nowhere special. From the very first night when a raw chocolate moose provoked a choir of "is it possible to get the recipes?", nothing was short of delicious. From avocado allergies to vegan diets to gluten intolerances, they catered to our demands and requirements without a glitch. A typical day of dining looked a little like...

Breakfast: Coconut milk black rice pudding, fruits, jams, gluten free nut loaf toast, ginger tea and a spirulina banana smoothie.

Lunch: Raw gado gado sauced in local ingredients of peanuts, chili, galangal, garlic, salt and pepper.

Dinner: Prawns steamed in banana leaf and turmeric, ginger, garlic, lemongrass, grated coconut, coconut milk and chili and served with organic red rice, sautéed vegetables and edamame.

Desert: Coconut meat and lemongrass pudding made of coconut meat, zest of lemongrass, seaweed, live food honey and fresh vanilla.

So with 17 people and 15 meals, were there any complaints heard? Well there was that one lunch where a few people thought one salad was a little heavily dressed. In other words: no. The

website could have claimed “well balanced and mind-blowing meals” and it wouldn’t have been exaggerating.



Dairy free croissants, homemade jams, poached cinnamon bananas and fresh fruit – just a typical breakfast on retreat with Oneworlds.

The magic of the unexpected

The entire 6 days of the retreat was peppered with the unexpected. In our rooms, the usual offerings of 50ml bottles of booze and a miniature sewing kit were replaced by oil burners, incense sticks, natural soaps wrapped with beaded bracelets, and eco drink bottles personalised with our own names. During our introduction, we were educated on Bali and its place in **Indonesia**. The retreat’s founder, Claude, likened Indonesia to a necklace of pearls and gems sparkling with sapphire and emerald – somewhere in the middle of the necklace there is the diamond of Bali. He proceeded to talk us through the **rituals of birth and death** and the diversity and history of the island, even bringing out a Balinese calendar to explain its importance in **Balinese life**.

But perhaps the most significant of the retreat’s pleasant surprises was the connections formed in such a small window of time. Couples, singles, solos, groups and all ages connected over the insanity of modern life, the hilariousness of a partner Yoga session, and the joy and challenge of being on retreat. Perhaps it was the changing seat allocation at dinner, or perhaps it was just the foreign setting compelling us to converse over its intricacies. Whatever it was, the teary goodbyes were nothing short of sincere.

We leave you with these pearls of wisdom from someone who knows quite a bit about going to Bali on a quest of nature, spiritualism and peace...

“Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive for it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it.”

~ Elizabeth Gilbert.



The group attending a purification ceremony. Image via Samantha Chalker

The Oneworld Retreat Rundown

This incredible “Escape the World” retreat will set you back just \$1,650 US for single share or \$1,495 per person for twin share. This price is inclusive of:

- Transportation from/to airport/South Bali
- 6 days/5 nights of accommodation
- 15 well prepared meals
- 5 morning meditation and yoga sessions, which are 2 hours each
- 3 evening restorative yoga sessions, which are 1.5 hours each
- 1 evening of surprise yoga sessions, which are 1.5 hours each
- 2 Spa treatments
- Purification ritual at Tirta Empul temple
- Day of Silence
- Balinese Offering class and ritual
- Yoga overlooking the sunrise behind Batur Volcano
- Bicycle excursion (inclusive yet optional)
- Guided rice field walk
- Government tax and services

To see more of what Oneworld Retreats has on offer and to check out their special offers, visit oneworldretreats.com. You will not regret it.



The Oneworld Retreats pool

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Samantha Chalker is the Editor of inBali and Founder of Monsoon Blooms. When she's not scanning Bali editorial or plotting the rise of her fairtrade fashion biz, she cares for a tiny human named Cypress.

