

Yoga Teaching in Santa Barbara

A Mecca for Training Programs and Practice

Thursday, August 24, 2017

By Richie DeMaria



Santa Barbara Yoga Center

Santa Barbara is a yogic place. It's not uncommon to see someone unfolding gracefully over a seaside bluff in dancer pose, or bending their back upon the crowning boulders of Lizard's Mouth. Yoga is in our shared lifestyle and our worldwide brand. Our coastal city, whose mountains were likened to the foothills of the Himalayas by famed S.B. Yogi Rishi Singh Grewal, has for more than a century drawn mystics, healers, and mind-body enthusiasts. "Santa Barbara's splendid natural beauty arouses the desire in the individual to stay deeply connected to life," said Yoga Soup founder Eddie Ellner.

Now, with yoga more popular nationwide than ever — a joint 2016 study by Yoga Journal and the Yoga Alliance counted more than 36 million practitioners, a roughly 75 percent increase from the 20.4 million tallied in 2012 — Santa Barbara attracts more and more prospective yoga teachers, with at least nine different training programs offered in the city limits. The city is such an ideal location for yoga, in fact, that it is home to world-renowned master and creator of flow yoga, Ganga White, and his wife, Tracey Rich, whose influential co-teachings are felt in established studios such as Yoga Soup, as well as newer ones such as DiviniTree Yoga & Art Studio. And the city's instructors aren't ones to sit on their laurels — they continue to invent and innovate on the yogic front, with studios such as Santa Barbara Yoga Center and Let It Go Yoga teaching accessible yoga for the differently abled or branching into online teachings.



By Paul Wellman

Yoga Soup's Eddie Ellner hopes to free teachers from limitations. "The more you can grapple with the attachment you have to your ideas of yourself, the less you indulge them," he said.

WHAT IS YOGA

The origins of yoga date back more than 5,000 years, with philosophical roots grounded in a collection of sacred texts and songs developed in the Indus-Sarasvati civilization. Over thousands of years, the spiritual practice evolved to integrate physical movement; most of what we know as yoga is extremely recently developed.

"It turns out yoga is really the result of the global brain," White said, adding that the British Army's occupation of India in the 1800s hugely shaped the practice. "Before it connected with the West, yoga asana was very rudimentary and simplistic. There is a pretty strong likelihood that sun salutations came from British burpees, and many of the poses in yoga have been shown by scholars to have come not just from a well-being practice but from circus contortionists."

In the early 1900s, gurus such as Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda advocated the spiritual benefits to U.S. audiences, and by the psychedelic '60s, many Americans' gazes were fixed firmly on the Eastern Hemisphere. Still, yoga wasn't popular the way it is now. "You were always the black sheep in your family or neighborhood," recalled Rich of that era.

In time, however, yoga became commoditized and is now a gigantic and growing industry. The aforementioned survey found that, in 2016, Americans spent \$16 billion on classes, gear, and accessories, far surpassing the \$10 billion counted four years before. This current era of yoga is also likely the first in its multi-thousand year history that has a nonprofit overseeing the nation's teaching community. The Yoga Alliance asks any prospective teacher to be registered through the organization, which entails a minimum of a 200 hour training. That's where the teacher-training studios come in.

White Lotus Blooms

One of the first of its kind in Santa Barbara, White Lotus Foundation serves as the origin story for many area teachers. Opened in 1983 by Ganga White and Tracey Rich, the sprawling site, located on San Marcos Pass Road, encompasses a beautiful waterfall and swimming hole, quietly rustling bay leaves and chaparral, and sweeping views of the city and sea. The Chumash called this area Taklushmon: “the gathering place.” The ashram offers multiple retreats, and their training programs are intensive, where teachers-to-be live onsite.

White was drawn to yoga long before he knew what it was. “I definitely had the innate inclination to explore things and learn things, and that’s why I was so attracted when someone told me yogis were making flowers out of thin air in the Himalayas,” he said. But it wasn’t until “the turbulence of the ‘60s and everything melting down and the Vietnam War that it came into my consciousness that I should really look into this yoga that I had heard about.” White’s studies began in 1966; by 1968, he organized and led what is likely the first yoga teacher training in the U.S.: *The In-Depth Yoga and Teacher Training*. Soon, he became a world-renowned yogi, appearing in Hollywood films, embarking on national lecturing tours, and hosting yogi gurus from India.



by Paul Wellman

Pictured sitting at one of White Lotus Foundation’s swimming holes, Ganga White and Tracey Rich offer a training based in part on their jointly developed flow sequences.

While he was a teacher in Los Angeles in the late 1960s, Ernst and Ruth Haeckel, two yogis from Santa Barbara, were among White's first students. The German-born Ernst approached White and said, "Young man, I have been doing yoga since I was a child in the 1920s. Use me as a resource." White took him up on his offer and visited the Haeckels at their 40-acre site in 1968 when only the roads were developed. Later the Haeckels began to develop a yoga ashram replete with bomb shelter (which is now a kiva for meditation). White had dreamed of opening a yoga retreat center on a land like this.

In the meantime, White taught yoga to hundreds of people across the country and on his journeys met his future wife, Tracey Rich, on Maui. "We had a mutual respect, not only for each other, but for the importance of what yoga was in our individual lives, and that it was a very full-spectrum, deeply personal path of living," she said. "We are both into the inquiry into the human mind and consciousness and living, and that remains something we teach and share." Together, filming on VHS in L.A., they developed a best-selling series of yoga videos, which further expanded the practice for many yogis.

By the 1980s, the Haeckels' yoga center had fallen into disarray, with squatters on the land and financial troubles rumbling. In 1983, White and Rich offered to take over the land, settle the Haeckels' debts, and provide and care for them on the property until their death, which they did. The couple passed away in Santa Barbara seeing the property become what they hoped would be something very much like what White Lotus Foundation is today.

Now, yogis live here among the trees, rocks, wind, and sky, for 16-day in-depth teacher trainings or shorter-term stays. "You get to live the experience fully in nature, which we think is one of the greatest teachers," Rich said. Beyond that, they try to avoid teaching any one approach. "You have two schools of thought: one that everything was mapped out in the past, and the other that everything is relativistic and evolutionary," White said. "We're in the latter. We really try to teach people how to see for themselves."

Using their incredibly influential flow series — elements of which can be seen in countless yoga classes today — and White's book [Yoga Beyond Belief](#) as guiding points, the pair offer a vision of yoga as a complementary tool to understand and adjust to life's ever-changing course. "A lot of people hold yoga as a particular solidified practice concept or philosophy," Rich said. "There is no one path," White agreed. "It's relative; it's a constant journey; it's constant learning."

White Lotus Foundation, 2500 San Marcos Pass, Santa Barbara, CA 93105

805-964-1944

whitelotus.org