

Turkish Delight

Yoga done in a glorious setting with plenty of sunshine and fresh food; that's what Yoga Turkey offer, as **Stephanie Wienrich** discovered



Picture the scene: an unspoilt beach called Paradise Bay, wooden boats bobbing on the water, the late summer sun warming my back as I snorkel along... Now I know what our yoga teacher meant when he said last night, over a delicious dinner of dolma and borek, "Remember, this is a yoga holiday and not a yoga retreat."

Yoga Turkey is one of the more established yoga centres in Europe, having been offering holidays in this unspoilt corner of South West Turkey since 1997. The two yoga tutors who run the whitewashed centre and also teach on some of the courses, Michael Cullingworth and his Turkish wife Pervin, are passionate about yoga and handpick experienced international teachers to run courses from May to June and then again from September and October, ideal times to visit Turkey.

I join a mid-September week with Neville Cregan, a popular British teacher. Neville is

amiable and approachable, and jokingly calls his style 'Neville Yoga': an amalgamation of the best of what he has learnt from various teachers over the years. Neville Yoga turns out to be a patient, creative and gentle approach that works well for me, especially as I have recently lapsed in my own practice.

It is Neville's seventh year at Yoga Turkey (in all he has been teaching yoga for 12 years), and so he also doubles up as a helpful local guide, advising us on the best Turkish baths and markets. Our group soon bonds and we begin to organise sightseeing trips around our classes, including a boat cruise to some picturesque local bays, which turns out to be a highlight of the holiday.

Holiday not retreat

As Neville said, it is worth stressing that Yoga Turkey is first and foremost a holiday, with yoga as a focus. In other words, come here for the sunshine, the sea, and of course to practise yoga, but don't come expecting Sam starts and daily lectures on the sutras. Not only are

there few rules at Yoga Turkey, but there is a great emphasis placed on the finer things in life: good food, good company, and, yes, even good wine – all in moderation, of course.

In fact, Yoga Turkey is almost as famous for its food as it is for its yoga courses. Michael and Pervin use a cook from the area, Hülya, who prepares us delicious seasonal meals based on the freshest local ingredients. The dishes are mostly vegetarian but even the meat-eaters among us are more than satisfied. I particularly enjoy the abundance of fresh fruit at every meal: the juiciest watermelon, the best pears I have ever tasted, and perfectly ripe plums. It's like eating sunshine. Lunch and dinner are served at a large communal dining table on our hosts' terrace. As we help ourselves to the numerous colourful dishes, including stuffed courgette flowers, Pervin explains the names and provenance of the ingredients and I begin to pick up a smattering of Turkish words.

The yoga is of course the main draw here. The teachers offer a variety of styles, from

the familiar ashtanga and iyyengar to the more obscure okido (Michael's speciality) and many also offer a complementary activity or treatment, such as shiatsu, reflexology, hiking in the nearby mountains, or even salsa dancing. Neville is offering Thai massage.

The yoga starts at 10am after a 30-minute walk from our village hotel to the centre. The taxi drivers call the village Gölüköy, but it's really two separate but similar sleepy seaside resorts: Gölüköy and Türkü. We are staying in Gölüköy, at a somewhat faded but pretty and friendly hotel set slightly inland. Here we enjoy generous buffet-style breakfasts and while away the evenings over a cool beer in the bar. The yoga centre sits at the very edge of Gölüköy, away from the shops and hotels. There used to be an olive grove here and the beautiful old gnarled trees – and the oil that is still collected from them every year – remain a feature. The road is quiet, and there is a completely undeveloped beach just around the corner, the aptly named Paradise Bay, with simply the clearest waters and the most wonderful views out to the islands of the Aegean.

The morning sessions are the more active, beginning with standing poses (good for grounding yourself) and finishing with the wonderfully named corpse pose (savasana) or sometimes a short, seated meditation. The evening sessions are more workshop-like. Neville encourages us to ask questions about the exercises we've been doing and we begin to prepare for the next morning's poses, limbering ourselves up for the more challenging ones.

Neville talks to us fairly constantly about what we are doing, and especially about the breath. Apparently in one study it was found that 80 per cent of cardiac arrest patients were breathing into their chests rather than their diaphragm. We learn a lot about the diaphragm over the week, becoming more conscious of its position and role. If you hold your hand on your lower ribs, where the diaphragm is, and simultaneously clench the other hand as well as your toes, you can feel how the breath immediately shortens and tightens. This is a simple demonstration of how stress can make our breathing shallower and less effective.

Active letting go

Neville describes yoga as an active way of letting go of muscle tension. We can use our breath to massage the internal organs and cleanse ourselves and we practise this in class with a breath called the shring skull. This involves breathing out quickly from the base of the abdomen and then inhaling naturally. Another practice we all like is the lion breath: for this one you open your eyes as wide as they can go, open your mouth, stick out your tongue and make a long "Hah!" sound. Try it. It looks silly but feels great.

By Thursday we are warmed up enough to begin to explore back bends. Ustrasana or camel pose, where you kneel on the floor and bend back to touch your feet, is so powerful that we all need to rest afterwards. Neville encourages us by saying that the first time he tried it he had to lie down for five minutes. A key thing to remember with back bends is not



Clear blue waters soothe yoga-wearied limbs.

to use your buttock muscles. This sounds easy enough until we put it into practice. Simple but enlightening instructions like this can totally transform how a pose feels and how much you can get out of it.

"If you can stand on your head for three hours, you conquer time," say the scriptures. Needless to say we don't succeed. However, I do progress with my headstand, even managing to inch away from the wall, my personal security blanket. Headstand is especially good for the circulation, as the system gets a rest from the pull of gravity. The other commonly practised inversion, shoulder stand, improves the metabolism and the functioning of the thyroid. Neville usually likes to work quite quickly up to inversions, via semi inversions, including back bends, and more fluid sequences, although it depends on the students' experience. Our group is diverse, ranging in age from mid-20s to 70. At least two members have never been to a yoga class before and a number of us have new and old injuries to contend with, ranging from a broken finger to bruised ribs. The group support extends to the yoga sessions, however, and we're soon helping each other get deeper into poses and cheering each other on to achieving moves that had seemed utterly impossible only a few days before.

Towards the end of the week we all try urdhva dhanurasana or crab pose. I have enjoyed popping up into this pose since childhood, but this time we do it against the wall using a lift under the hands and with Neville carefully watching us. The props help me get up with more control, allowing me to focus on getting my wayward limbs into line.

As the week progresses, despite all the yoga, walking, swimming and sightseeing, I am amazed at how my energy levels keep on increasing. As a swami once said to Neville, "With exercise you use up energy; with yoga you create energy". Yoga can also help you learn to do other forms of exercise, such as running, in a more efficient way. On the

holiday I already notice an improvement in my swimming technique, and even in the way I walk. If the daily walks to and from the centre initially seemed like a bit of a chore, they soon become an integral part of my practice, especially on the mornings when breakfast has been particularly tempting.

Another positive aspect of sleeping down in the village is that we feel more part of village life. We can pick a jetty by the sea to lounge on in-between classes or try a new restaurant on the rare evening when we're not eating at the centre. The locals are warm and welcoming, and it is refreshing to be in a place with no tourists and all that implies.

We finish off our week with a visit to the Bodrum Hamam, a fairly authentic Turkish bathhouse with segregated areas for men and women. The ritual of the hamam was passed down from the Romans to the Byzantines to the Turks... and now to foreign visitors. First you strip and wrap yourself in a sarong, then you open up your pores in the steam room, before letting the bossy young attendants scrub and lather you clean. It's like being bathed as a child. In fact, by the time you've been towel-dried, then vigorously massaged with oil (some of us proudly compare our badge-of-honour bruises the next day), and sent back out into the world, you will look and feel as shiny and clean as a freshly washed infant.

On the last day I have my Thai massage. This powerful treatment has been called 'passive yoga' as the masseur manipulates your limbs while you relax. Neville was attracted to it as a complement to his yoga teaching; and the yoga helps him avoid injuries that could be caused by giving the intensive treatments, which usually last one and a half hours or longer. He starts with my feet and moves systematically up the body, ending with a gentle pressure on 'sens' points on the forehead, temples, third eye and above the upper lip. I go straight into the evening yoga session afterwards and can't stop yawning; it feels like I am releasing some deep-seated tiredness. However, I also feel strangely alert and grounded too, and hope Neville is right when he says the effects of the massage can last for a long time. As I look around at my fellow classmates, and see a room full of happy glowing faces, I feel sure that the benefits of this holiday will last. ☺

More information

Yoga Turkey run yoga holidays in May, Jun, Sept and Oct. A week costs from £490 per person, including yoga tuition, accommodation for seven nights in a hotel with breakfast, all lunches, and four evening meals. Return flights to Bodrum cost from £199 with Tulip Holidays: 020 8211 0001; www.tulipholidays.com and Turkish Airlines: 020 7471 6666; www.thy.com. Visit www.yogaturkey.co.uk for more information. For further yoga holidays contact Neal's Yard Holidays on www.nealsyardholidays.com or 0844 888 5050.

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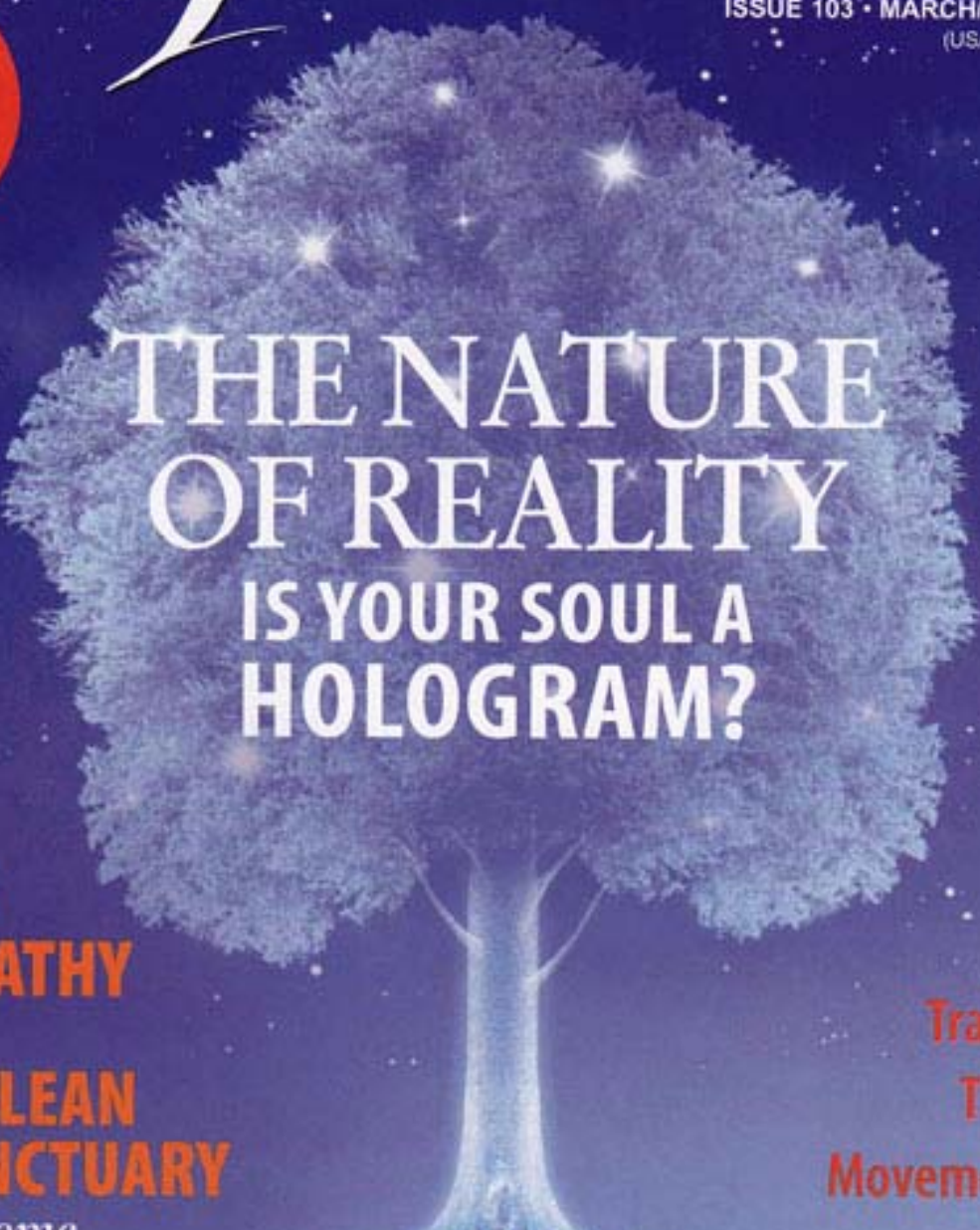
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