



The practice of yoga has been around for 5,000 years, but it just now seems to be making its way into the mainstream. From New Zealand to California, seasoned athletes and everyday citizens alike are embracing its myriad benefits, from increased flexibility to greater peace of mind.

By Allison Block

Alexis Fedorowych, a yoga teacher in New Zealand, only became serious about yoga after she lost her job as manager at a cosmetic laser company in southern California. Slovakia-born Stefan Talian, now a resident of San Diego, California, had been working as a chef – utterly stressed and depressed – when his personal trainer suggested he add a bit more stretching to his routine. Both now lead classes on a daily basis (and practice yoga nearly daily, too). Though their teaching approaches and lifestyles are different, neither can imagine going a day without yoga.

Both Alexis and Stefan teach Bikram yoga, which is among the most rigorous of yoga styles. Students perform a series of 26 postures in a room heated to 105 degrees. The heat helps to detoxify the body and facilitate deeper stretching. It also tests one's mettle; from the moment students begin to move, the temperature in the room climbs ever higher!



With nearly 500 Bikram studios around the world, many instructors take full advantage of the opportunity to travel and teach. While Alexis, who was born and raised in Michigan, has taught in the U.S., England and New Zealand, Stefan is staying put in San Diego for the time being. He teaches at seven studios in the area, including laid-back La Jolla, where students often peel off their wetsuits on the way to class.

“I think for the most part, the students are the same everywhere you go,” says Alexis, who lives in Dunedin, a small New Zealand town reminiscent of Scotland, where a morning stroll means encountering familiar faces, including her students. “Some will love the heat, others will complain that it’s too hot. They have good strong classes one day, very challenging ones the next. They are afraid of back bending or locking their knee, but then once they do, a whole new world opens up to them!”

“The great thing about yoga is that it truly is universal,” adds Alexis. “When it resonates with someone, they are automatically on the same page as another student practicing on the other side of the world. If they were ever to meet one day, I think they would see their attitude toward yoga is very much the same.”

Bikram Choudhury, the Indian yoga guru who copyrighted the 26 postures in the Bikram series, is not your typical yogi. He sports a Rolex, collects Rolls Royce’s and often teaches class while reclining on a couch. But his yoga has helped thousands of souls heal their weary, worn-out bodies. English is not Choudhury’s native tongue, and the Bikram dialogue, which students must memorize in the course of becoming a teacher, is rife with grammatical errors that would make most English teachers swoon.

For Stefan Talian, whose English was very rudimentary when he went to the Bikram teacher training, this wasn’t a problem. “It’s funny,” he says, “but American teachers in training had a more difficult time learning the dialogue, because it’s not English you use in regular conversation. For me it was not a big deal, because I didn’t have that ‘right’ English anyway.” Learning the Bikram dialogue actually helped Stefan improve both his English and his public speaking skills, which he had struggled with in the past. “As a chef I didn’t talk a lot,” he says. “There’s no time to talk in the kitchen and my pans didn’t talk to me at all!”



For both Alexis and Stefan, a typical day begins with teaching – one or two classes. Unlike San Diego, which boasts T-shirt weather virtually year-round, Dunedin has four distinct seasons. Winters can be bitterly cold, and Alexis relishes the opportunity to spend time in a hot room. After class, she'll cozy up with a book at a local café (she raves about a recent read: the utterly riveting *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts) or try a new restaurant for lunch. If the weather's nice, she might stroll in Dunedin's botanical gardens or bask in the sun at one of its lovely beaches.

Afternoons, and often evenings, find her back in the studio, teaching or taking class. Evenings are spent sharing a home-cooked meal among new friends or at a local watering hole like Carousel, which features a heated outdoor patio, a cool DJ and some very creative cocktails. (Alexis likes the Napoleon Dynamite: Mandarin Napoleon brandy, fresh citrus and grapefruit juice, shaken with 10 Cane rum and served in a shot glass with a chili and sumac-spiced rim) "Bittersweet with a little bite," she says.

Stefan's après-class routine often includes a trip to the beach. "Growing up in Slovakia, I dreamed of living by the ocean," he says. "And now it's come true." Stefan recently took up surfing, and admits he's not quite ready to paddle with the pros. "I wouldn't call it surfing yet," he says. "Now it's success for me just to get on up on the board." The balance, strength and flexibility he's gained through yoga will surely help him conquer the waves.



As a relatively new teacher (he attended the Bikram Teacher Training in 2009), Stefan isn't quite ready to define his teaching style. Students who've taken his class would definitely describe him as energetic. With his commanding presence and an accent similar enough to Arnold Schwarzenegger to earn him the nickname "The Stefanator," he's a great motivator, always pushing students to do their best. "Sometimes I get excited and lose my voice," he says. "And sometimes I sweat more than my students!" Stefan also incorporates his experiences as a chef into class. In the first stretching posture, he tells students to press their bodies against their legs so that they resemble a Panini sandwich.

Stefan also keeps his cooking skills sharp by working as a chef for private gatherings. He draws a telling distinction between the patrons of the restaurant where he was once a chef and the students he teaches daily. "In a restaurant, people love me for about 90 minutes," he says. "When they are enjoying my food, they are having fun, but then, when they leave, they feel full, stuffed and they don't want to see me again. In the yoga room, students may dislike me for 90 minutes, because I'm telling them to do crazy stuff with their bodies and I won't open the door to give them fresh air. But then, after class, they love me forever."



Alexis's demanding yet compassionate teaching style has remained consistent, whether she's leading a class in London or Los Angeles. "Because Bikram yoga is such a precise dialogue, focusing on an ordered progression of postures and a healthy dose of strict discipline, it doesn't matter where in the world I go," she says. "The 'bones' of the teaching is the dialogue, so as long as that is being conveyed properly, my personal teaching style can remain the same." Even students who don't understand English very well are able to gather so much simply from the consistency of the classes, she says.

Stefan is delighted to see students get hooked on the yoga as he did. "I love to see how they improve and I love to be the 'delivery guy' of that magic," he says. Alexis, too, is inspired by her students. And though she might sometimes be hard on them, it always comes from a place of love. "We all have this idea in our head, a perception of the limitations we have – in all areas of life, not just yoga," she says. "Unless we are pushed out of the proverbial comfort zone we have created, we can get stuck there. I always say that the teacher's job is to have more faith in the student than the student has in him or herself during those difficult moments in class."

For Alexis, teaching at studios far from home has brought home a basic truth. "While there are always going to be slight cultural differences, people for the most part are the same everywhere," she says. "They want to be happy and fulfilled and inspired and they all love to laugh."

In her travels, Alexis has noticed a lot of assumptions and preconceived ideas people have about one another, which more often than not are based on myth or hearsay. "We can all learn by keeping our eyes, ears, minds and hearts open," she says. "We need to be accepting of one another and most importantly, realize that nothing makes us more alike than the fact that we all need air to breathe, water to drink and food to eat. We need to be really conscious of our usage and our waste, and maintain our mindfulness and intention in all these areas, no matter how big or small the country that we call 'home.'"

Boost your skills and discover the English speaking world.

Takeoff English – Your experts for English immersion programs!

