

YOGA

IN BISHOP, ASANAS BEFORE AND AFTER BOULDERING

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INDIA

The soft ringing of a Tibetan bowl floated through camp at dawn. A dozen of us climbers gathered on granite boulders and sat facing the rising sun. The high desert undulated in tan and pale green waves of rock and sage to the foot of the Eastern Sierra escarpment.

It was early in March and we'd come for a weekend of yoga and climbing in Bishop.

A lanky 22-year-old named Victor Copeland handed out paper towels and told us to get our noses ready for the breathing exercise called pranayama. Some guys evacuated their sinuses in one short, air horn blast. Others puffed sweetly and quietly, like bridesmaids at a wedding. Under Copeland's direction, 12 sets of synchronized nostrils inhaled and exhaled, vacuuming the high desert air.

Copeland, a boulderer with thick black glasses and a pierced nose, said the breathwork, meditation and chanting would ease our bodies into the vigorous yoga practice up next. The chanting started with the traditional "om" and went on from there in Sanskrit, a language I'd never spoken before.

"I was thinking of how to teach 'om' in a cool way, and it's with jazz," Copeland had said earlier, riffing "Om skidoo bow wo."

This trip was organized by Copeland and two other Sacramento yoga teachers, Natasha Sedykh and Robert Hallworth. The three friends run a business called Sadhanadventures.

We'd caravanned from Sacramento through the suburban mini-mart sprawl of the El Dorado foothills, stopping for limp, gas station sandwiches and continuing on through sleet and snow.

I carpooled with Sedykh and her 31-year-old brother Sergey, who works as a Russian interpreter. Natasha Sedykh cranked world beat music with Eastern Indian influences. I loved it, imagining us on our way to making a Bollywood climbing video.

At dusk, we pulled into Buttermilk Country under a line of low, black clouds that unleashed dark walls of rain. We camped in a valley not far from the Peabody Boulders.

I froze in a tent that by morning was studded with ice crystals.

Pilgrimages are an ancient practice. People have traveled far and hard to lay flowers at a tree shrine, pray in a holy city or touch a sacred rock. Pilgrimages have been part road trip, part religious holiday since the days of Patanjali, author of the Yoga Sutras, or Britain's Geoffrey Chaucer. In India, pilgrims have purified their spirits in the Ganges River for more than 2,000 years.

Pilgrimages to climbing spots are part of every climber's life. Crags, canyons and mountains offer a place to hook up with what is sacred

and pure. Yoga is a practice that unites body, mind and spirit. Sadhanadventures—"spiritual adventures"—created yoga/climbing retreats to take climbing road trips to the next level, spiritually and physically.

"It seemed a natural marriage because yoga and climbing are so integrateable with each other, and complement each other," said Hallworth, 41. "Yoga keeps you flexible, subtly strengthened and relaxed, so you can climb and do things on rock that normally you would definitely give a second thought to."

Sedykh, 39, has taught yoga for seven years. She used a soothing accent to lead the group through a series of yoga postures and exercises, or asanas and vinyasas. Many were named after natural elements or animals, because that's what yoga was based on when it was developed along the Indus River 4,000 to 6,000 years ago.

Our mats formed a circle on a wide, flat spot of gravel. We warmed up with Sun Salutations, raising our arms to the glowing ball of golden light. A human Stonehenge.

Rays of light streamed down our skin. A cool breeze blew off snow-frosted, iced oatmeal cookie foothills and mint chocolate chip mountains. We sucked clean mountain air in through our pores. Spine, arms and legs stretched in a sequence of moves that fused every cell with the essence of earth, sky and air. Nothing else seemed to move in the high desert.

"In my opinion, the best place to do yoga is outside," said Hallworth, who has a serious face and raven-black hair with long sideburns.

"There's a reason yogis for thousands of years have gone to the Himalayas to do their austerities and various yogic practices. In the thinner, more rarified air, it intensifies all the practice. You treat your body to a concentrated, intensive, shorter road to the more liberating effects of yoga."

Sedykh chose other postures and exercises specifically for climbing. The twisted side angle pose (*Parivrtta parsvakonasana*) built core strength. The tree pose (*vrksasana*) strengthened shoulders and balance.

She lived in India for five years and studied yoga there. In India, some follow a practice to cleanse the stomach by sticking their fingers down their throats. It's done in groups, like a party for bulimics. But most of the time, yoga feels good—once you get past the pain of stretching your body in ways it hasn't stretched since you were five, even if you're a climber. A good yoga session leaves you feeling like you've just gotten a massage.

"I always tell people it's an internal massage. Nothing else can give you this kind of feeling," she said.

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Yoga in the mountains sent the endorphins redlining and primed us to climb. Chanting in Sanskrit, the old Indic language, felt primal, connecting us to nature and the ancients. Sanskrit, after all, influenced Indo-European languages.

Afterwards, during breakfast, we discovered the dog on the trip could sing. Cupid belonged to Joy Reinsch, a 27-year-old landscape architect who grew up in a small Indiana town. Cupid liked to point his shiny black nose and his bumpy pink chin up at the sky and yodel.

But the wirehaired little mongrel had to be goaded into it. One of us had to start howling first. The dog stood next to whomever else seemed really into it so he could wail all wolflike, in a pack. He stopped unless we sang with him. So we kept it up. Cupid howled so long his voice cracked.

Josh Halsey held the dog's leash in his bare toes, saying, "I try to exercise the prehensile nature of my feet. I feel shoes have dumbed-down our feet."

Halsey was a 27-year-old fire medic with a tattooed stomach and a '70s mustache drooping past his lower lip. He'd come on the trip with Munsai ("Moonsigh") Thompson, an ethereal earth spirit who works at the natural foods co-op in Sacramento and plans to become a midwife.

Cupid hiked in silent meditation with everyone else up to the Druid Stones on a trail that was used long before bouldering caught on. At 6,150 feet, the plateau of boulders features 200 established "problems," or routes. The flat Druid Stone itself towers 60 feet above the plateau.

Copeland hiked up in thongs that were worn down at the big toes from bouldering. He helped develop bouldering here in 1999 and 2000. He was 16 or 17 years old. He lived at a climber crash house in Bishop where he paid \$20 a month to sleep under the stairs, and survived on ramen noodles.

Following in the footsteps of earlier area climbers, the boulderers pushed themselves to climb higher and harder.

"They call it buttermilking," he said. "It's kind of a cross between mountaineering and bouldering—climbs so high that if you fall, you'd get hurt."

We warmed up on the Sacrificial Boulder. Hallworth topped out, stood on the rock and cawed like a crow. Two friends worked on an overhanging boulder nearby. Ryan Wilson is a 25-year-old database specialist with a shaved head and a big grin. He and Web designer Kyle Hagel, 27, work together at an outdoor store in Sacramento.

Others tried a V2 problem, Fear of the Unknown, on the back side of the Sacrificial Boulder. Hallworth gave beta to those who attempted to lieback up large plates of rock known as patina that ended just before the top. But most bailed at the crux, which demanded only two points of sketchy contact with the rock. A smaller boulder sat below, waiting to batter whoever fell.

Copeland and Hallworth sent it. Other guys cawed their approval.

We had the bouldering area to ourselves all afternoon. People worked on classics like a V3 called Thunder, the V4 Arch Drude and the V7 Kayla. We were touching sacred stone at the Mecca of California bouldering.

In the evening, Copeland led yoga practice in a huge, dark tent dubbed the Taj Mahal while Sedykh and Hallworth cooked miso soup and green curry with tofu and veggies. We stretched sore muscles and relaxed our amped spirits in preparation for a trip to the hot springs.

"We want to go to the springs and have fun," our guru said, "but not be spazzed and all energetic. That would be wacked."

The end-of-the-session yell, which I thought might be a little unyogilike, turned into a howl.

That night, it was yogis gone wild at the hot springs—although just for the record, and Reinsch's Indiana mom, she wore a bathing suit. **■■■**