



great escapes

Dive into your practice and recharge your spirit with a retreat experience that meets any budget, style, or schedule.

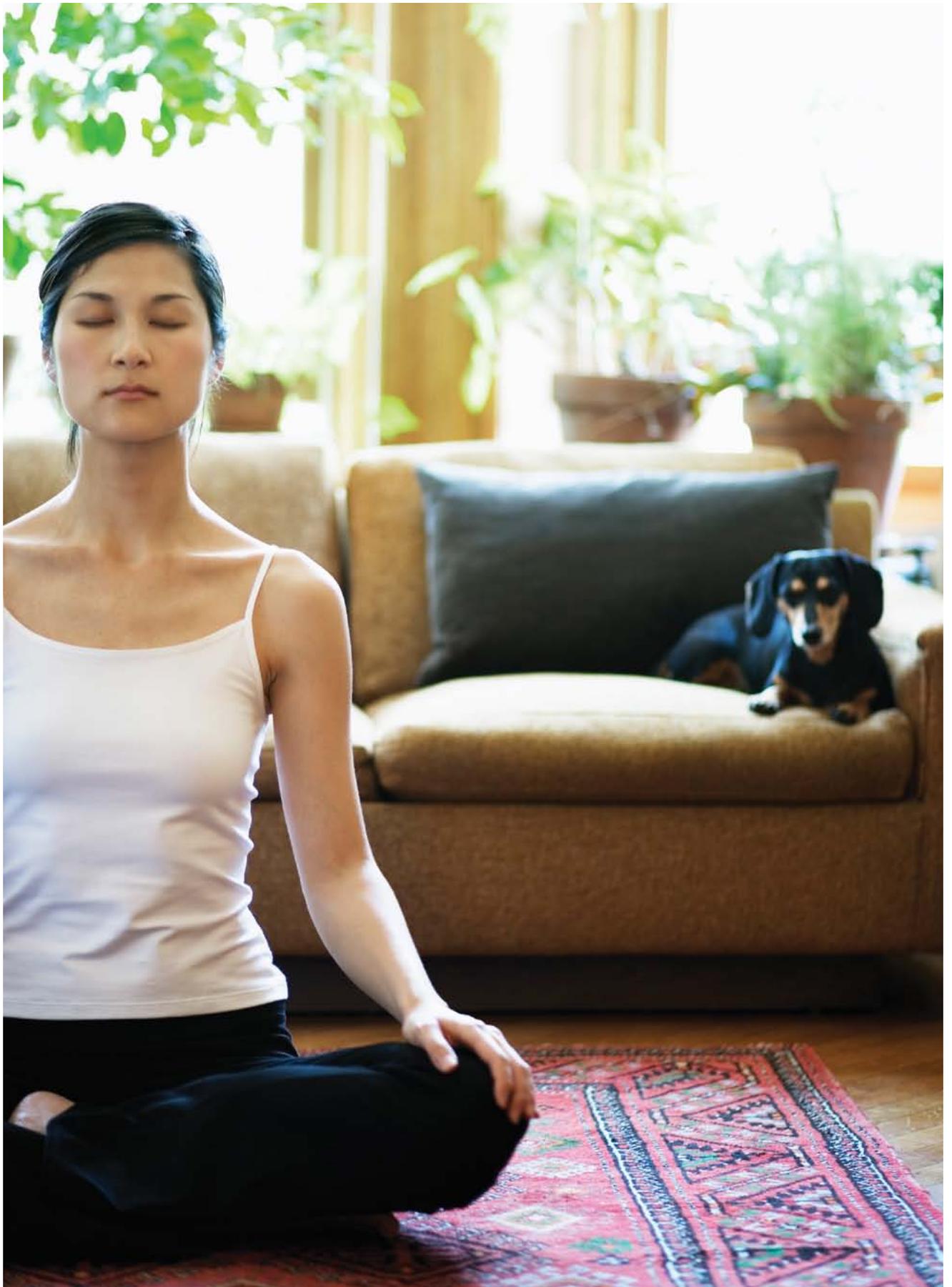
As avid yogis, we've spent some of the best times of our lives deeply engaged with the practice, often on retreats. Yoga getaways can be an opportunity to take stock of your life, set new intentions, deepen your relationship with a teacher, or renew your commitment to your yoga. Best of all, they can be a rejuvenating break from the busyness of everyday life and a reminder of the richness and depth that can be found in an experience as simple as breathing.

But when life is harried and the budget is tight—arguably, when you are most in need of a retreat—going on one can seem out of reach. How can you get away from work and family for a week? Where will you find the funds for a luxury trip? Sometimes, taking care of yourself doesn't seem easy.

As believers that retreats are an essential part of the yogic life, we put together four fun ideas to help you create your own retreat experience, regardless of budgetary or time constraints. Yes, there is something to be said for doing Down Dog beneath the palms, with turquoise waves caressing your toes, and we recommend booking those trips whenever possible. But you can glean similarly rejuvenating benefits by going on a “retreat” at home, in another city, or on a custom-crafted getaway on any budget. To enjoy the depth of your practice, all that you really need is a willingness to put aside a little time for yourself.



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PHOTOS (PAGE 68): ANTHONY GEORGIS; (PAGE 69): SUSAN SEUBERT/BOTANICA/GETTY IMAGES; THIS PAGE: DAVID KRESSLER/BOTANICA/GETTY IMAGES

there's no place like home

Sometimes the best place to get away from it all, reconnect with yourself, and invigorate your practice is at home. There are few costs, no check-in times to adhere to, and no one else's agenda to accommodate, so you can devote your time just to you.

Having the house to yourself for a day or a long weekend can be a rare luxury. So, when you can arrange it, make the most of your solitude by turning off your phone, computer, and TV; letting family and friends know you won't be available; and putting aside your to-do lists. What's left after clearing away your responsibilities and distractions is a quiet space in which you can go inward and nurture yourself in familiar surroundings.

"It's great because you have all the comforts of home," says yoga therapist Diane Cesa, of Setauket, New York. "With a home retreat, I have the time and space to feel grateful for what I have. I'm more at peace for what's here and now. Time seems to go slower." That time allows Cesa to delve into her yoga practice, meditate, and prepare healthful, nutritious foods. You could also spend time reading a yoga philosophy book, taking baths, and walking or getting other exercise. When approached with intention and a quiet, inward focus, all of your activities can be nurturing.

To plan your own home retreat, decide what you hope to come away with and what activities will help you get there. With the help of books and DVDs, you could spend the weekend doing rejuvenating practices, deepening your understanding of a particular style of yoga, or establishing yourself in a pranayama or meditation practice.

Or you might do a simple asana practice as preparation for some deep inner work and spend your day in prayer, contemplation, and journaling.

"Everything is part of the retreat," says Cyndi Lee, owner of OM Yoga in New York City. She recently reserved a day at her home in East Hampton to do Tibetan Buddhist meditation. For 12 hours, Lee sat in formal, silent meditation for two hours at a time, taking 20-minute breaks to walk, swim in her pool, and do dishes. "It was almost like swimming meditation, going back and forth, back and forth," she says.

Tim J Luddy devoted a weekend to jump-starting a home practice to complement his regular vinyasa classes in San Francisco. For a ready-made program, he turned to Baron Baptiste's *Yoga Bootcamp Box*, a kit complete with a daily schedule, CDs for guided meditations and asana practices, food recommendations, and pose flash cards. "This was something I could create without going to an exotic location," Luddy says. His 2½-day retreat not only initiated a steady home practice but also helped him rediscover meditation after 20 years.

Although the word "retreat" often conjures up a soothing experience, don't be surprised if a weekend practicing alone brings up difficult emotions. "A home retreat is total immersion," Lee says. "I want to see if I can get quiet and connect with myself and work with what comes up. It's being with me, in my own face, in my practice, with no distractions."

If you let yourself go deep, give yourself time to resurface too. Make a plan for reembracing daily life, so that you are ready to welcome your returning family or the first business call after your solitude. And that spaciousness and relaxation you feel after your home retreat? It's always available, right where you are.

{ go on retreat
without going
anywhere }



FREEDOM WITHIN FORM Design a schedule for your home retreat, and stick to it. Specify times for waking and going to bed, yoga and meditation sessions, journaling, and any activities that might help you experience stillness. Even schedule time to do the dishes. Often, when you create solid boundaries for the practice, you're better able to experience the freedom that arises within it.

SHOW ME THE WAY For practices designed to soothe the nervous system, you might want to peruse books such as *Insight Yoga*, by Sarah Powers; *Mindfulness Yoga*, by Frank Jude Boccio; *Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving into Stillness*, by Erich Schiffmann; or *Relax and Renew*, by Judith Hanson Lasater. You can also find asana sequences for calming, energizing, or focusing the mind in "Ready to Meditate?" by Janice Gates, at yogajournal.com/readytomeditate.

trip out with friends

“Do it yourself” has become *de rigueur* for crafts and home improvement projects—so why not for yoga retreats? It’s one way to create a luxurious yoga vacation that’s custom tailored—all by you!—to your style, schedule, and budget.

Last spring, a group of yogis from San Francisco persuaded their teacher (and *Yoga Journal* contributing editor) Jason Crandell to lead a small group retreat to Hawaii. The idea came up one day when a few friends gathered for a postclass coffee. One of the students, Jennifer Stebner, mentioned that she wanted to go to Hawaii, but she also wanted to do yoga while she was there and knew she wouldn’t do it on her own. Before long, the usual Saturday hangout time turned into an impromptu planning session for a group yoga getaway.

Stebner set about coordinating the logistics and discovered that it wasn’t as difficult as she’d anticipated. A simple online search turned up a big, beautiful rental house right on Kailua Beach, on the island of Oahu, with a sprawling lawn and a covered patio—plenty of room for practice. Splitting the rental among five people cost far less than a hotel stay, and having a house with a well-equipped kitchen made it easy for the group to cook and save money on food. “In the past, I’ve debated whether or not to attend a retreat because of the expense,” says Stebner. “On the Hawaii trip, we were able to choose and negotiate the cost of our own accommodations, we ate when and how we wanted, and we got personalized attention from Jason for less than the cost of a private session.”

create your
own dream
yoga vacation

For his part, Crandell charged less than his normal fee because he worked fewer hours and got a vacation himself.

Personal attention from the teacher was one of the highlights of the trip, as was the freedom to plan the yoga schedule day by day. Before the trip, the group agreed on a 2½-hour daily practice with the rest of the day off to play and explore. At the end of each day, they checked in with each other and decided the best time for practicing the next day. Crandell was flexible with class times, and he took requests depending on how the students were feeling. Some days they did a vigorous morning practice, but on days the sun was out early, they took advantage of being outdoors and opted for a more restorative practice in the afternoon, when the rains came in. “I loved the flexibility to practice whenever it suited us and that the practices were focused on individual requests,” says Lauren Lim, who adds that her favorite memory of the retreat was pairing up and dropping each other into backbends on the beach.

By all accounts, the trip was a success. Even Crandell was surprised by how much he enjoyed himself. “Most retreats, I’m working at least six hours a day, so this felt much more like I got to take a vacation and do what I love to do, which is teach small groups of students,” he says. And the students bonded over shared meals, inclement weather, and a Hearts card game that is still ongoing. “It was a success because of the dynamics of the group,” Lim recalls. “I think we all have similar temperaments: No one was demanding, and it was just easy to be together. And when you’re in Hawaii, how could it not be successful?”

FIND YOUR TEACHER Don’t feel shy about approaching your yoga teacher about creating a retreat. Teachers often work long hours during retreats and often have to do the marketing themselves, so if you do the organizing yourself and can make it more of a vacation than a workweek for the instructor, it may be something of a treat. Give your teacher some time to think about it and to come up with a fee that feels fair.

KEEP IT SMALL Limiting the group to eight people at most will make it easier to find accommodations and to arrange transportation. It’s also easier to coordinate meals and accommodate special diets, and for your teacher to create practices that address everyone’s needs and desires.

TALK THE TALK Sharing intimate space with people for a week can be trying if you haven’t talked through some of the details ahead of time. Be sure to agree on the basics of food, lodging, costs, and personal time. For example, do you want to eat together every night? Will you be comfortable with people eating meat or drinking alcohol? How much yoga do you want to do each day? Do you want to plan outings together? Aim for no surprises.

SPACE OUT When it comes to lodging, be sure you have plenty of space. Obviously, you’ll need enough bedrooms and common areas. But it’s also a good idea to have both indoor and outdoor areas with enough room to practice.

AT WHAT COST Plan to share costs for a rental car (or two), food, lodging, and the payment for your teacher. Someone will also have to put down a security deposit if you rent a home. Be sure to keep receipts so that you don’t have to rely on your memory when you’re crunching the numbers at the end of the trip.





SAM DIEPHUIS/ZEFA PHOTOGRAPHY/VEER

move to a city beat

Drawn by the chance to study with a favorite teacher or to combine a business trip with a great workshop, you can craft an urban retreat in a far-flung (or nearby) city. Sign up for the class, reserve a nearby hotel room, and try not to schedule a whole lot more. The real juice of a cosmopolitan yoga experience often comes from stepping away from your familiar surroundings, practicing in a new environment, and enlivening your senses with the fresh sights and sounds of the local culture.

Real estate developer Ari Nessel flew from San Francisco to New York City to spend four days studying with yoga teacher Dharma Mittra last May. Shortly after arriving on a Thursday afternoon, he unfurled his mat and, alongside advanced students, worked on his one-handed Headstand. After a long Savasana and guided meditation, he felt ready to take in the city and walked to meet a friend at Blossom, a popular gourmet vegan restaurant.

The next day, he attended a daylong workshop with Dharma Mittra, and that night he took in a *kirtan* concert with Krishna Das. On Saturday, he was up early, ready for another full day of classes. “Studying at Dharma’s studio is unique. It feels like a mix of yoga studio and ashram, retreat center and cultural hub. The contradictions are outstanding when one walks into and out of the yoga center into the streets of NYC,” says Nessel. “Dharma says that New York City is the perfect place to perfect one’s practice because of all of its distractions. Like the Frank Sinatra song goes, if you can practice there, you can practice anywhere.”

For a retreat-type experience, choose a weekend workshop with a

single teacher and set a limited schedule for socializing and sightseeing, but prepare for something more exhilarating than quieting. ParaYoga teacher Karina Ayn Mirsky of Kalamazoo, Michigan, finds that urban retreats offer a great chance to explore the Tantric concept of *bboga* (enjoyment of the world around us). She packs a sense of adventure and mindfulness rather than a hectic itinerary. “I like to be in the moment and explore the culture and identity of an area. Some of the most fun comes from the spontaneous things,” she says.

If you choose a destination like L.A. or Miami, you can go to class, then head to the beach. Or, try the opposite and immerse yourself in the crowds of a city street at rush hour. If you’ve been sitting on your cushion for a while, you might be surprised by the sense of oneness with humanity you can feel when you’re on vacation. Of course, you can embrace the retreat experience at a day spa by soaking, steaming, and being massaged. Or treat yourself to live theater.

The key to creating a retreat experience rather than a whirlwind getaway is resisting the temptation to overindulge the senses. It can be jarring to leave a peaceful meditation and head straight into a trendy restaurant. But, there’s no reason you can’t enjoy fabulous food after asana. Maybe choose a slightly sedate place and linger over your meal. People watch instead of window-shopping or racing to the next activity. “There is great value in practicing *sthira* [steadiness] and *sukha* [ease] amidst the movement, pace, and stimulation of a big city,” Mirsky says. Indulge in a hot bath each night, get plenty of rest, eat lightly, and try to stay mindful no matter what you’re doing. At the end of a few days, you’ll feel like a new person.

{ an urban
retreat can be
energizing }



STUDY ABROAD Plan an urban retreat by studying a favorite teacher’s schedule and either making a pilgrimage to their home base or planning a visit to a city where they are holding a workshop. Many urban yoga studios attract great local talent as well as traveling teachers. Here are a few urban studios that host workshops and classes with master teachers:

LOS ANGELES Bikram’s Yoga College of India (World Headquarters), City Yoga, Exhale Center for Sacred Movement, Golden Bridge Yoga, YogaWorks

NEW YORK CITY Dharma Mittra Yoga Center, Jivamukti Yoga Center, Kula Yoga Project, Laughing Lotus, OM Yoga, Pure Yoga, Virayoga

SAN FRANCISCO Iyengar Yoga Institute of San Francisco, YogaKula, The Yoga Loft, Yoga Tree, YogaWorks

splurge when you can

Getting away to a classic yoga retreat (where, once you arrive, everything is taken care of) is a true treat. From gorgeous beach resorts to idyllic woodland havens, retreat centers are designed to wholly support your yoga and your relaxation. You'll nourish your body and soul with delicious and healthy meals, walk wherever you need to go, and enjoy an unhurried schedule with but one thing to do: enjoy yourself. Here, your asana practice can develop, your meditations can deepen, and your spirit can be renewed.

For a week last May, Linda Bracanovich spent four hours a day doing yoga with the Pacific Ocean coming into view with each Up Dog. Each evening she would savor breathtaking sunsets of orange and pink while dining alfresco or relaxing on the porch of her thatched-roof *casita*.

Bracanovich was attending a retreat with San Francisco vinyasa flow teacher Stephanie Snyder at Hotel Lagunita in Yelapa, Mexico, a coastal village accessible only by boat from Puerto Vallarta. A longtime meditator, Bracanovich had become a regular at Snyder's class months before, when she discovered that asana helped manage chronic joint pain in her knees. "I thought that it would be good to really step up and do a more concerted practice, and that a retreat would take me deeper," she says.

Each morning the group of 20 students gathered at 8 a.m., before it got too hot, for a 2½-hour practice with a view of Banderas Bay. Afterward, they dug into a hearty breakfast at the

hotel's open-air restaurant before spending the day exploring the village, snorkeling on a nearby island, hanging out by the hotel pool or on the beach, or reading. They met again in the late afternoon for a two-hour practice before dinner.

The combination of focused practice and leisure time was the perfect alchemy for Bracanovich, whose job as the vice president of business development for a software company keeps her busy. "During a retreat, you're allowing yourself to steep in yoga and in peace," she says.

It also proved beyond a doubt that a yoga practice was right for her. When she arrived at the retreat, her knees hurt so badly she didn't think she'd be able to practice. But after a few days, the pain had disappeared. "Doing this retreat helped me to understand more the profound intelligence of asana," she says.

It's common for people to commit more deeply to a yoga practice after a retreat. Doing yoga every day, for hours at a time, allows the effects of the practice to settle deep into your body and psyche. Everything about a retreat—from inspiring natural surroundings to the wisdom of your teachers, and from the company of like-minded yogis to the freedom from real-world obligations—supports this process.

The toughest part of going on a retreat is deciding which of the many fabulous options to choose from. If you're interested in studying with a specific teacher, check his or her website for a workshop schedule. Yoga teachers often travel to beautiful locations, providing every retreat participant with the delicious opportunity to soak up their expertise while enjoying a relaxing vacation.

You can also choose your retreat by location. Do you love the briny smell of the sea and the kiss of warm breezes on your skin? Mexico, Hawaii, Costa Rica, and Bali are popular destinations. Want something equally relaxing but closer? Yoga retreat centers dot the United States and almost uniformly offer quietude, nature, and lovingly prepared, healthful meals. Consult our list of possible retreat destinations (*page 78*) and check center websites for a calendar of events.

Another consideration for your retreat is comfort level. If you are craving five-star accommodations and gourmet meals, you can find instruction as refined as your surroundings at several luscious retreats for \$2,500 or more per week. Or you can attend a modest retreat where participants camp or share dorm-style rooms and may help with some of the cooking and washing up for a few hundred dollars for the weekend. Many centers offer massage and other pampering treatments to round out your experience.

Whatever your reasons for taking a retreat—to go deeper into your practice, to nurture yourself, or to step off the busy wheel of your life for a few glorious days—you're sure to find it once you make a commitment to pack your bags and go. And you'll likely discover something else in between your 20th Downward-Facing Dog and the realization that you haven't once had the urge to check your BlackBerry: yourself. And that may be the biggest benefit of all.

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{ a luxurious
retreat can feel a
bit like heaven }





places we've been or would love to go

COMO SHAMBHALA

Yoga weeks at luxury resorts in Bali and Parrot Cay (Turks and Caicos) feature teachers like Sarah Powers, Erich Schiffmann, and Rodney Yee. Enjoy deluxe accommodations and gourmet cuisine in tropical settings. (L) comoshambhala.como.bz

COSTA RICA YOGA SPA

This oceanfront resort in Nosara, Costa Rica, offers programming that blends yoga with surfing, Spanish-language instruction, weight-loss programs, and more. Retreats include daily yoga, meditation, and pranayama sessions. (L) costaricayogaspa.com

FEATHERED PIPE RANCH

Practice with world-renowned teachers and relive your best summer camp memories. Meditate on the pier that overlooks a sparkling lake, do yoga in a log cabin, and feast on delicious organic food. Accommodations are rustic, and you choose the level you desire—from tents to yurts to tepees to shared or private rooms. (M) featheredpipe.com

Your retreat experience can be as plush or as budget-friendly as you desire. Here are some of our favorite yoga retreat centers, which we've classified as either affordable (A), moderate (M), or luxurious (L).

HARAMARA RETREAT

Nestled in mountains above the Pacific Ocean, Haramara offers a serene spalike experience, but it's just a short cab ride away from the surfing town of Sayulita, Mexico. The palm-thatched cabanas don't have electricity, but there are oil lamps and wonderful hot showers. (A) haramararetreat.com

KRIPALU CENTER FOR YOGA & HEALTH

Located in the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts, Kripalu is a popular year-round destination for yoga teachers such as Seane Corn, David Frawley, Timothy McCall, and Shiva Rea. The center also offers the popular Retreat and Renewal program, in which you choose your own classes and activities. (M) kripalu.org

MOUNT MADONNA CENTER

This beautiful site in California's Santa Cruz Mountains is part ashram (home to yoga master Baba Hari Dass and a Hanuman temple) and part practice haven with modern dorms, a lake, a hot tub, and lovely grounds. Yoga and meditation retreats and personal retreats are available. (A) mountmadonna.org

OMEGA INSTITUTE

Located in New York's Hudson River Valley, this woodland oasis offers many retreats with international teachers and hosts the Being Yoga Conference each August. Enjoy swimming, boating, hiking, a meditation sanctuary, and the Ram Dass Library. (M) eOmega.org

RANCHO LA PUERTA

In the temperate mountains of Baja California, Mexico, this luxury spa hosts yoga weeks with international teachers and its own in-house yoga program. The 3,000-acre property abuts a sacred mountain. Enjoy guided hikes, gorgeous pools, organic gardens, and fabulous food. (L) rancholapuerta.com

SIVANANDA ASHRAM

Retreat to the Bahamas to enjoy two daily yoga sessions, including asana, silent meditation, mantra chanting, and lecture. (A) sivananda.org/nassau

VIA YOGA

Via Yoga is a destination for yoga and surfing in Sayulita, on Mexico's west coast. Weeklong retreats include two yoga classes daily, optional surfing lessons, massage, snorkeling, and lodging in luxurious beachfront villas. (L) viayoga.com

WILLKA T'IKA GARDEN GUEST RETREAT CENTER

Located in the Sacred Valley of the Incas, between Cusco and Machu Picchu, Peru, the site is a dream destination for practicing yoga and meditation. Vegetarian meals, outdoor solar baths, massage, hiking, sightseeing, and more. (M) willkatika.com ❖