

Have Yourself a Meditative Little Christmas

It's not too early to start planning. This holiday season, skip the frantic shopping and food comas. Give yourself the gift of a yoga retreat.

By ANNA DUBROVSKY

Christmastime kicks Manhattan into overdrive: brighter lights, thicker crowds, extra-ostentatious window displays. Last year, yoga teacher Sarah Reis traded the hubbub for two weeks of intense yoga study in Sweden. “I’m very close to my family and friends, and I spend Christmas with them almost every year. But this time I wanted to do something different for myself,” she says. “I wanted and needed time to reflect, time to be silent.” She found such peace and clarity at Haa International Course Center that she plans to return this December. “It’s the best Christmas gift I can give myself.”

In Tokyo, Christmastime barely registers. “Christmas isn’t celebrated in Japan, so many Christmases have been spent working,” says U.K. native Em Bettinger, who has lived in Japan for eight years and teaches yoga there. “It can be a little depressing for a Westerner here.” This year, she and her husband will spend the holiday at Yoga Thailand, a retreat center they’ve returned to several times.

Whatever your reasons for seeking an escape during the holidays, a yoga retreat



YOGAVILLE CHRISTMAS Santa and the “ashram elves” distribute gifts to homebound neighbors each year. You can join in.

could be just what you need. You might rediscover the true spirit of the season. You might start the New Year with positive affirmations rather than wishful resolutions. “When people come, they’re harried, they’re tired, they’re world-weary,” says Leslie Ghirla, general manager of The Expanding Light retreat center in northern California. “After a couple of days, they’re all bright and shiny and happy.”

FROM SPARTAN TO SUMPTUOUS

There’s a retreat to suit every personality, and accommodations range from spartan to sumptuous. When deciding on one, consider not only your budget and time frame but also your appetite for yoga practice. If a class a day sounds sufficient, choose from hundreds of spas and resorts where yoga is a side dish on a broad menu of activities. If you’re yearning for total immersion, you might prefer time at an ashram. Some spiritual communities have special holiday rituals that guests can take part in. At Yogaville, an Integral Yoga center in Buckingham, Virginia, you can accompany Santa Claus and the “ashram elves” as they distribute gifts to people confined to their homes.

Take into account your dietary preferences. Most retreats specialize in healthy fare, but some are more restrictive than others. If your day isn’t complete without a foamy cappuccino, you might be disappointed if rice tea is the closest thing to it. Some destinations boast world-class chefs. At others, guests are expected to help in the kitchen.

Weather may also have a bearing on your choice of retreat. Would you rather explore the grounds in sandals or on skis? What’s your idea of idyllic: a pine forest powdered with snow or a snorkel-friendly reef? These days, you can deepen your yoga practice just about anywhere.

If a yoga retreat is at the top of your wish list, start planning now. Spots fill up

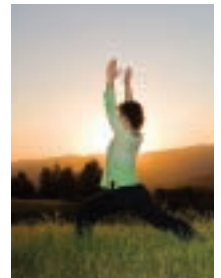
fast during the holidays. “Some guests from last year made their bookings one year in advance,” says Jutima Dallaghan, cofounder of Yoga Thailand. Here are six trip ideas. All prices are per person and include accommodations, meals, and yoga programs. They don’t include airfare or spa services and other personalized treatments.



THE EXPANDING LIGHT Nevada City, California www.expandinglight.org

The Expanding Light retreat center is part of Ananda Village, a 40-year-old spiritual community in the Sierra Nevada foothills.

Founded by a disciple of Paramhansa Yogananda, Ananda Village is home to more than 200 people who meditate at least three hours a day. That creates “a palpable energy” that guests immediately sense, says Ghirla. The center’s four-day Christmas retreat, like its Thanksgiving and New Year’s programs, is designed to “help people tap into the bliss and the joy



that’s inside of them—to sort of create a highway to that spot,” she says. It begins with eight hours of silent meditation. If that’s too much, stretch your legs by wandering the trails that wind through meadows and pine forests. On Christmas Eve, take part in the community’s Christmas pageant, which culminates in a reenactment of the Nativity. A piano is brought into the dining hall for an evening of fire-side caroling, cookies, and hot chocolate. On Christmas Day, sleep in or attend a morning yoga and meditation session. Just be sure to get to breakfast before the “eggnog lattes”—espresso mixed with hot eggnog—run out. “People drink those lattes like there’s no tomorrow,” Ghirla quips. The guesthouses sleep a maximum of 45. There are 12 standard rooms, which share four bathrooms, and eight deluxe rooms with private bathrooms.

Dates: Dec. 22–26

Rates: \$440 for RV camping, \$560–\$700 for a shared room, \$800–\$1,000 for a private room



HAA INTERNATIONAL COURSE CENTER
South Sweden

www.yogameditation.com

Haa, the Scandinavian Yoga and Meditation School’s retreat center, has been offering intensive courses in classical yoga and tantric meditation since 1972. The annual Christmas Course is a 14-day immersion led by the school’s founder, Denmark-born Swami Janakananda. Enrollment is limited to 35 people. Expect to practice yoga poses, breathing exercises, silent meditation, concentration techniques, deep relaxation, and a tantric meditation called *ajapa japa*—all before lunch. The vegetarian meals rely heavily on organically grown produce from the center’s own fields. You won’t find stim-

ulants such as coffee, chocolate, or black tea, so it’s a good idea to wean yourself off them before the course. An hour and a half of each day is dedicated to *karma yoga* tasks such as working in the garden, tending to horses, preparing food, and cleaning. You’ll observe two and a half days of silence: no talking, writing, or reading. Free time allows for strolling or skiing in the forests and fields surrounding the center, skating on the lake, horse riding, or floating in “the pyramid,” an enclosed saltwater bath that’s lightless and sound-proof. Once a week, the center prepares a wood-fueled Finnish sauna.

Dates: Dec. 19–Jan. 1

Rates: 7390 Swedish krona (about \$1,200) >>



KRIPALU CENTER FOR YOGA & HEALTH
 Stockbridge, Massachusetts
www.kripalu.org

The nonprofit Kripalu Center offers hundreds of programs a year, from yoga teacher-training courses to shamanism

seminars to “Zen painting” retreats. December brings a crop of holiday-themed workshops. This year’s include a five-night Anusara Yoga retreat and a weekend of “YogaDance.” In your free time, take advantage of the center’s extensive “healing arts” menu, which includes ayurvedic treatments, energy work, mind-body coaching, and nutritional consultations. The property was once a Jesuit seminary, which is reflected in the simple accommodations. Housing options range from dor-

mitories (complete with bunk beds) that sleep as many as 22 people to private rooms with attached baths.

Dates and Rates: Vary by program; Holiday Anusara Yoga Retreat: Align with the Divine, Dec. 26–31, \$857–\$2,021; Holiday Blast: Let Your Yoga Dance, Dec. 26–28, \$386–\$890; Refilling Your Well: A Self-Nurturing Retreat for the Holidays, Dec. 26–29, \$508–\$1,232; Finding Peace: A Holiday Meditation Retreat, Dec. 28–Jan. 1, \$603–\$1,483

SAMASATI NATURE RETREAT
 Caribbean coast of Costa Rica
www.samasati.com

Samasati, founded in 1997 by three Italians and an Argentinian, is surrounded by national parks and protected areas: playgrounds for lovers of adventure and wildlife. “It’s not a retreat where you get bored,” says co-owner Silvia Zani.

Between twice-daily yoga classes at the resort, you can explore a primary rainforest by zipping across cables strung between trees. Kayak through a jungle thick with tropical birds. Learn to surf. An excursion a day is on tap for Samasati’s annual Christmas and New Year Yoga Caribbean Adventure. After taking in the breadth of Costa Rica’s biodiversity, you can take it easy. Doze in a hammock, stroll on unspoiled white-and-black sand beaches, or head to the spa for a honey-and-papaya scrub. On Christmas and New Year’s Eves, Samasati hosts a special dinner and party with live Caribbean music. Nine bungalows and a guesthouse with five double rooms accommodate up to 40 guests.

Dates: Dec. 20–Jan. 3

Rates: A seven-night stay ranges from \$984 for a standard guesthouse room with shared bathroom to \$1,798 for a bungalow with private bathroom. Excursions not included.

Anna Dubrovsky is a contributing editor of Yoga+.





SIVANANDA ASHRAM YOGA RETREAT

Paradise Island, Bahamas

www.sivanandabahamas.org

Ashram life never looked so luxurious. The Sivananda Ashram sits on five and a half acres of tropical paradise. At its center is a semi-sheltered meditation temple. Exercise platforms face the shimmering Caribbean. Days begin at 6 a.m. with a *satsang* that includes silent meditation, chanting, and a talk or reading. You'll practice yoga postures and breathing techniques in the morning and again in the afternoon. A second satsang is held every evening and sometimes includes a concert or dance performance. To "maintain the proper atmosphere" at the ashram, attendance at both satsangs and yoga sessions is compulsory. At Christmas, Easter, and other times of the year, the retreat center offers special programs with renowned teachers and artists. This year's Christmas and New Year's symposium, "Unity in Diversity, Inviting Divine Grace," will bring together spiritual leaders and musicians from different traditions, including a tantric priest from South India, a Kabbalah scholar, and a West African shaman.

Dates: Dec. 22–Jan. 1

Rates: \$79 per day for a tent space, \$89 for dormitory accommodations, \$99–\$109 for double and single rooms. Bathrooms are shared. Air-conditioned rooms are an additional \$10 per day.



YOGA THAILAND

Koh Samui, Thailand

www.yoga-thailand.com

Paul and Jutima Dallaghan's Ashtanga Yoga *shala* (school) and retreat center may be the only smoke- and alcohol-free getaway on the island of Koh Samui. The couple opened Yoga Thailand in 2003 after living and teaching in New York. This year, they're relocating to the southern part of the island and reopening just in time for their annual Christmas and New Year's Retreat. The new center can accommodate as many as 60 guests. Its eco-design features include rain-

water harvesting and solar water heating. Each of the 28 guest accommodations has an unobstructed view of the sea, and most have an outdoor shower. The property includes a meditation garden, juice bar, saltwater swimming pool, and wellness center with four rooms for colon hydro-

therapy, infrared sauna, massage, and other treatments. Yoga Thailand's holiday retreats tend to be "big family affairs," says Jutima Dallaghan, and the new center will include a children's play area that's out of earshot from the beachfront yoga halls. The primary instructors for the Christmas and New Year's Retreat will be Paul Dallaghan and Neil Barker, both senior students of Ashtanga



Yoga founder Sri K. Pattabhi Jois and pranayama master Sri O. P. Tiwari.

Dates: Dec. 20–27 and Dec. 27–Jan. 3

Rates: Each weeklong retreat costs 590 euros (about \$900) for shared accommodations or 790 euros (about \$1,200) for a private room. +

Opposite page: Yoga class: Courtesy of Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health; Practice, emperor stick and woman riding canopy: Max Monti / Courtesy of Samasati Nature Retreat. This page: Sivananda ashram and asanas: Courtesy of Sivananda Yoga Retreat staff; Dining and lotus flower: Courtesy of Yoga Thailand