



future yoga

Yoga continues to grow in popularity here in Australia - we take a look at where it's headed

◆ BY BROOK MCCARTHY ◆



You've heard of acro yoga and aerial yoga, stand-up paddleboard yoga and yugalates, but have you heard of yoga on horseback, yoga with free weights or yoga combined with wine appreciation? Don't worry – you soon will.

While yoga has been practised in the East for thousands of years, this age-old tradition transplanted into modern Australian culture via America is less than 200 years old in the west. It has spawned a significant number of homegrown leaders and legends, including Shandor Remete, Roma Blair, Martyn Jackson, Eve Grzybowski, Eileen Hall and Nicky Knoff. More recently, Simon Borg Olivier, Nicole Walsh, Duncan Peak and Mark Breadner have been leading the way for a new generation of yogis. Yoga has found its way into the hearts, minds and spirits of Australians all across the country and it's made one thing very clear – it's here to stay.

BORN TO YOGA

Old '60s and '70s yoga stereotypes still die hard, but you're more likely to be a "secular yogi" in modern day Australia – practising a rigorous Bapiste-inspired power yoga or vinyasa flow workout rather than a chanting, meditating Zen-out. Yoga is now mainstream. Chances are, even your favourite football team has yoga in its training program – the practice increases flexibility and reduces the risk of injury, meaning

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: yoga raving at the Future Sound of Yoga's Night Creatures; Yoga by the Sea; pre-natal yoga is growing in popularity; post strength training stretch using the TRX at Flow Athletic; lululemon athletica Balmain's Yoga Degustation; Yoga from the SKY at Centrepont Tower; Yoga by the SEA at Sydney Aquarium



LEFT: a class underway at the Playground Weekender Festival, Wiseman's Ferry, NSW.

fewer missed games and better all-round performance. And increasingly, people discovering yoga for the first time are arriving at their first class pregnant, as more obstetricians and midwives advocate yoga for pregnancy.

"Half of our new students come to us when they're pregnant, 90 per cent of whom are totally new to yoga," says Andi Kiprillis of Yoga Plus in Melbourne's Berwick, who's seen 1000 babies born to students in the three years that the studio has been operating. Our next generation of (non-in utero) yogis is starting much earlier, sampling yoga in preschool or primary school, spearheaded by Australian organisations like Zenenergy Yoga and Yoga to Go Kids.

YOGA YOUR WAY

Party-hearty yogis are flocking to "yoga raves" – alcohol- and tobacco-free events that combine yoga and music for a good time that you won't regret the next morning. DJ-husband and yoga teacher-wife act the Future Sound of Yoga regularly tour the east coast of Australia as well as overseas. Their joyous fusion of yoga, dance and music with a live DJ was quickly imitated and adopted by different groups and companies. Experiencing yoga beyond the class format runs the gamut, from two-hour workshops or intimate yoga and meditation weekends away to festivals combining multiple crowd-pulling teachers, homegrown and international kirtan artists, vegetarian

food and gluten- and sugar-free treats. Sydney's yoga ghetto, Bondi Beach, is so synonymous with yoga that it even has its own Bondi Yoga Festival. In short, yoga is now hip.

Kate Kendall, co-owner of trendy Flow Athletic in Sydney's Paddington, teaches yoga blended with free weights, TRX and cycling. "We attract people who don't gel with traditional yoga but are looking for a complete, balanced workout," says Kendall. "We marry the athletic mindset with the 'magic' of yoga in a contemporary setting." Kendall's studio runs very early morning classes, not so students can meditate at *vata* time (before 6am), but so office workers can be at their desks by 7:30am.

"Our students crave relaxation and want to be shown how to slow down. I teach people to be more body-aware and curious, and to retain this state of alertness throughout their day," Kendall says.

A LEARNING CURVE

The increasing popularity of yoga has seen a boom in teacher training, with approximately 130 teacher training programs on offer, giving teachers and studios the chance to earn some serious cash. Byron Bay has become a magnet for overseas students who come to study amid Byron's world-renowned beaches and hinterland. People are seeking Byron-based teachers to train with, searching for past student feedback online, augmented with social media research. The only mystery is why Byron's yoga teacher

community hasn't formed an alliance to lobby tourist boards internationally, similarly to what the Daintree region's spas and retreats have done.

Yoga teachers working in Australia can expect to earn \$45 per class working in a gym, an average of \$65 in a studio and \$140 in corporate yoga settings. Enterprising teachers are increasingly online savvy, building followings through blogs and social media, teaching one-on-one yoga through Skype and creating e-courses and e-programs focusing on common issues and ailments such as adrenal fatigue, insomnia and diabetes.

Facebook and Instagram are filled with pictures of advanced asanas performed by impossibly lithe practitioners. Yoga "selfies", which tread a fine line between aspirational and narcissistic, will hopefully become less popular as teachers grow to realise they often put people off rolling out a mat for the first time.

YOGA IN THERAPY

Yoga's rich, varied and sometimes downright weird toolbox of techniques are increasingly used in talk therapy. Led by Jon Kabat-Zinn's "mindfulness based stress reduction" training, therapists across Australia are prescribing mindfulness, breathing techniques and meditation to their patients. With more than 45 per cent of people reporting a mental health concern at some time (according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics) combined with high rates of youth suicide, rising obesity rates, social isolation and chronic Indigenous Australian health issues, it's clear that we are ripe for yoga.

Australia is a world leader in yoga therapy training standards and practitioner registration, with the Australian Psychological Society recently welcoming a Yoga Psychology Interest Group. Yoga is being taught in prisons, old age homes, rural and urban Indigenous communities and teenage mothers' groups as well as groups recovering from cancer treatments and others living with chronic disease or pain.

“Yoga is psychology,” says Dr Lauren Tober, a clinical psychologist and yoga teacher working in the Byron Bay area. “Yogic philosophy and practices bring a deep sense of peace and wellbeing – which is why many people see a psychologist. In my classes and counselling sessions I often teach clients to develop a witness perspective, welcoming all sensations, emotions, thoughts and beliefs.”

Dr Tober draws on research headed by Richard Miller on the efficacy of iRest Yoga Nidra (a research-based practice of deep relaxation and meditative inquiry provided by the US Integrative Restoration Institute) in reducing depression, anxiety, stress (particularly post traumatic stress disorder) and other chronic mental health conditions.

Human Rights Officer Marianne Elliott trained to be a yoga teacher with the intention of returning to her post in Afghanistan to teach her humanitarian colleagues in the field. “Living with high levels of stress, danger and isolation in Afghanistan and Gaza led me to yoga teacher training,” says New Zealander Elliott. “I wanted to find a new way to support people in war-torn countries where I’d been working, so I designed an online yoga course – the kind of course I would have liked.”

Students all over the world are now doing Elliott’s online video courses, which include 30 Days of Curvy Yoga for rounder physiques and 30 Days of Yoga for People to Busy to Do Yoga.

“Some of my online students live in remote rural areas with no studio nearby,” Elliott says. “A surprising number of people aren’t comfortable starting yoga in a studio environment – they worry about being too old, too fat, too inflexible, too unfit or too uncoordinated.”

A SPLINTERED TRADITION

Yoga in Australia today is not a coherent movement. While power and vinyasa yoga styles are more popular, there remain

plenty of slower, more devotional styles and “purist” spiritual communities that focus on yoga’s less popular components, including vegetarianism or veganism, *seva* (service) and philosophy.

“In the last few years we’ve noticed students seeking a more comprehensive experience of yoga,” notes Yoga Australia president, Leigh Blashki. “This search for yoga’s deeper aspects has predominantly been in meditative practices, including pranayama, Yoga Nidra, mindfulness and self-enquiry as well as yoga therapy.”

Yoga is not a coherent culture of rituals, institutions or leaders. Writes Matthew Remski: “It has no family infrastructure. It offers no life-transition rituals. It does not marry or bury us. It does not host AA meetings. It runs no soup kitchens. I don’t need yoga to be a religion. I need it to provide community.”

Real community extends far beyond tea shared after class. Community mobilises to fill the gap between government services and need, fundraising, organising and empowering individuals to cohesive action. And while there are many individual studio *seva* projects, including plenty of free or low-cost classes, it’s only very recently that the yoga community has mobilised for social change – led by groups such as Yoga Aid, the Yoga Foundation, the World’s Longest Yoga Chain and Off the Mat, Into the World.

TOWARDS MATURITY

The Australian yoga community is still finding its feet, yet to know how to collectively respond to controversies within our community, including sexual abuse by senior teachers, yoga’s attraction to people with eating disorders, the sexualisation of yoga through advertising and social media as well as our ideological and philosophical differences.

Yoga has much to offer society’s most vulnerable. To be taken seriously, we need to be intellectually rigorous in our beliefs and opinions and step up as leaders, to demonstrate that we’re not merely paying lip service to our core foundation of compassion and union.

“In the not-too-distant future, it’s likely that global warming will cause mass social upheaval and people will need to be more dependent on the goodwill of each other,” says Eve Grzybowski. “If yoga teachers and students have practices that foster kindness, love, compassion, connection and gratitude, we’ll have what it takes to get through tough times. You can probably bet your car that in the future, yoga will keep evolving.”

Brook McCarthy is a yoga teacher and director of Yoga Reach online marketing consultancy (yogareach.com.au). She helps yoga teachers to magnify their impact, be bold in business and bring more people to the mat through business coaching, courses and e-programs.



RIGHT: Adore Yoga organised the Guinness record-breaking World’s Biggest Laughter Yoga Class on October 20 this year, bringing the community together to raise \$25,000 for Cancer Council NSW and to support teachers and students with cancer.