



# riding the waves

Surfing gives yogis an external experience of yoga. And yoga gives surfers a leg-up when they're on the board. **Jaimal Yogis** unearths the trend.

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID MARTINEZ; STYLIST: LYN HEINEKEN; HAIR/MAKEUP: TOKYO/WORKGROUP



**Opposite page:** Pro surfer Taylor Knox embodies the yoga-surfing connection in his daily life. **Above:** Yoga teacher and surfer Alika Medeiros is the model for the 'Best 5 Before Your Ride' sequence on page 56.

As I walk back to my Balinese cottage after surfing through the waning hours of light—neon green seaweed squishing between my toes under a dark pink sky—no other words seem capable of entering my wave-rinsed mind but “thank you”.

It's a thought that I've had many times on my yoga mat as well. And on my way back, I happen past a surfer friend of mine, up on a flat rock above the surf, striking an awesome Cobra Pose.

“No sunset session?” I ask, surprised. The waves are still perfect and Glen rarely misses an opportunity to surf.

“Ah, I'm out there right now, mate,” he smiles, “I'm surfing.”

I laugh and walk on, not wanting to disturb his practice. But looking back I see that Glen adds a surf stance to his vinyasa flow—the sort of feline crouch of a surfer getting “tubed” or consumed completely by the gaping mouth of the wave. I just had my own personal experience of yoga out there on the waves and Glen's bringing his surfing experience to his mat.

Watching Glen, I feel as though surfing and yoga have >>



>> been connected since the first Polynesians channelled the ocean on their huge wooden boards and the first wandering yogis in India started bathing daily in the Ganges. Both began more than two millennia ago and both were practised for spirituality and vitality. In the past decade or so, they've found their groove together.

World champion surfers like Kelly Slater and our own Layne Beachley practise yoga regularly—Slater is even known to be able to touch the top of his head to his heels in a glorious Rajakapotasana (King Pigeon Pose). Well-known yoga teachers like Shiva Rea host yoga-surfing retreats around the globe, and there's been a proliferation of combined yoga-and-surfing classes and retreats around Australia (see 'Get on Board' on page 51).

It's obvious that the two disciplines complement each other physically. For example, both yoga and surfing can be done in a group but are equally enjoyable when done in solitude and silence. Both require strength, flexibility and a lot of balance; attract lovers of nature; and keep their devotees looking and feeling unusually young, strong and vibrant.

#### MYSTICAL MOMENTS

But yoga and surfing intersect on the mental and spiritual planes, too. The heightened focus and presence that's needed to ride a wave—a constantly spontaneous movement—is often described by surfers as just the sort of mystical experience yogis have talked about for thousands of years: a merging of the fixed sense of self, or ego, with its surroundings.

"I didn't know where I ended and the wave began," writes Steven Kotler in his popular surfing memoir, *West of Jesus*, as he is propelled effortlessly on a spiralling vortex of water.

Or, as yoga teacher and passionate surfer Peggy Hall puts it, "We are united with the energy of the ocean. I don't think there's a real surfer alive who doesn't have some sort of spiritual experience every time they paddle out."

## best 5 before you ride

Yogi-surfer PEGGY HALL developed this sequence for surfers to do right on the beach. The practice shown here builds heat in the body and warms the muscles and joints used in surfing. To reduce the likelihood of tiring, Hall emphasises moving with the breath and not holding poses too long. "Before paddling out, you want to mentally prepare yourself and warm up your body," she says. "You don't want to exhaust yourself."

### 1 TAI CHI CIRCLES

Stand with your feet hip-width apart and your toes pointing straight ahead. Interlace your fingers and reach your arms overhead. Exhale and stretch over to your right, then bend your knees and sweep your torso in front of you, keeping it parallel to the ground. Keep circling around until you stretch out to the left, then come back up to centre as you inhale. Circle 4 to 5 times in one direction. Then interlace your fingers the nondominant way and repeat on the other side.



### 2 HORSE STANCE BACK STRETCH

Take your feet wide apart and turn them out. Place your hands on your thighs and dip your right shoulder between your legs. Look to your left elbow. This will stretch your back, which can get fatigued from sitting on the board. Hold for a breath or 2, inhale, come up to centre, and do the other side. Repeat 3 to 4 times.



### 3 UTTHITA PARSVAKONASANA (EXTENDED SIDE ANGLE POSE) WITH ARM CIRCLES

Come into Side Angle Pose on your right side, with your right forearm resting on your right thigh. Circle your left arm counterclockwise, as though you're doing the backstroke. This counteracts the forward reaching you do while paddling and stretches the intercostal muscles between each rib, which can increase your lung capacity.

The presence you develop in yoga serves surfers well during the tedious moments, too, since more time is usually spent waiting and paddling than actually riding a wave. The yogic technique of observing the breath can transform the long lulls between sets of waves into a focused meditation. And the simple act of staying with mentally or physically challenging sensations during poses can help stave off frustration when surfing overcrowded waves.

In yoga, we observe and even move the unseen waves of energy within us, known as *prana*, or "life force." In surfing, we feel the external wave energy that we're tapping in to during yoga practice.

Whether or not you learn to surf, the metaphor is an apt one for leading a yogic life. Back in the 1960s, there was a poster of Swami Satchidananda, founder of Integral Yoga, in a flowing white robe and white beard surfing a Hawaiian wave.

It read: "You can't stop the waves, but you can learn how to surf." The saying speaks to a key yogic teaching about the mind: while you may not be able to calm your mind into permanent and utter stillness, you can learn to relate to the endless waves of thought in a more free and skilful way in order to surf them with grace.

Surfing can teach yogis to accept both the good and the bad waves by seeing them as impermanent. We all have ongoing waves of thought, experience and emotion—waves of joy and sorrow, fear and love. They're constant. Yet there

is an ingrained tendency to think that the "deep" part of ourselves, the part we feel after, say, a great yoga class or a sunset surf in Bali, is accessible only during the good waves; and we hold such a strong bias for having these experiences that the rest of life can become drudgery.

In surfing, you learn that even the less-than-perfect waves are composed of the same substance, the same beautiful saltwater, as the perfect ones, and they can be experienced just as fully. After years of practice and learning how waves form, the skilled surfer knows that even the wild, stormy or mundane one can be enjoyed. Surfing, like yoga, is a challenge worth meeting day after day after day, no matter the conditions. ♣

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PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID MARTINEZ; MODEL: ALIKA MEDEIROS; STYLIST: LYN HEINEKEN; HAIR/MAKEUP: TOKYO/WORKGROUP





#### 4 HIGH LUNGE, MODIFIED

Interlace your fingers behind you and draw your shoulder blades together. Step your left foot back and, staying on the toes of your left foot, bend both knees. Bring your hands away from your back and down toward the ground. Keep your back thigh perpendicular to the ground and move your tailbone down until you feel a stretch along your left thigh.

#### 5 PARIVRTTA UTKATASANA (CHAIR TWIST), VARIATION

Stand with your feet hip-width apart and your toes pointing straight ahead. Take your right arm across your shins and extend your left arm up toward the sky. Lengthen your spine and twist your chest and shoulder open. Look down at your feet. Stay for a few breaths, then switch sides.



### pro breather

As a boy in surf-saturated California, TAYLOR KNOX wanted to be a pro surfer from the time he was eight years old. By the 1990s, he was known worldwide as one of the best, consistently placing in the top 10 on the world tour and taking first prize in the K2 Big Wave Challenge after successfully dropping into a terrifying 52-foot behemoth in Todos Santos, Mexico. At 38, Knox is now the oldest surfer on the professional world tour and is still ranked in the top 10, a feat he attributes largely to his daily yoga practice and meditation.

#### How did you get into yoga?

My best friend had been trying to get me to go for a year and I kept saying no. I thought it was weird. He finally bought me a gift certificate to a Bikram class for my 24th birthday. I had to go. I was so bad at it that I kept going just to show myself I could do it. I ended up enjoying it and realised it was a lot better than my stretching routine.

#### How does yoga help your surfing?

It's increased my flexibility and improved my breathing. My breathing is more relaxed, but I also feel like I have better lung capacity.

#### What's your yoga practice like?

I've been doing Bikram for the past 15 years, so I know the routine like the back of my hand. I'll still go to a class a few times per month but mostly I do my own combination of core strength and balance exercises and finish with some Bikram postures. Yoga has helped me know my body so that I can adjust my routine to how I'm feeling.

PHOTOGRAPHY OF TAYLOR KNOX: COURTESY OF RIP CURL

## >> get on board

Yoga for surfers? Surfing for yogis? These classes and retreats may be just what you need.

**SYDNEY:** Lunge studio in Manly offers eight-week yoga courses for surfers. [www.lunge.com.au](http://www.lunge.com.au)

**NSW SOUTH COAST:** Tidal Dreamings runs women-only yoga and surfing retreats and workshops in Broulee. [www.tidaldreamings.com.au](http://www.tidaldreamings.com.au)

**BYRON BAY:** Santosha runs yoga retreats with surfing sessions included at Byron Bay. [www.yogasurfingretreats.com](http://www.yogasurfingretreats.com)

**GOLD COAST:** Surf in Paradise offers women-only yoga and surfing classes once a month. [www.surfinparadise.com.au](http://www.surfinparadise.com.au)

**VIC SOUTH COAST:** Australian Yoga Retreats runs yoga and surfing weekends at Bells Beach. [www.austrianyogaretreats.com.au](http://www.austrianyogaretreats.com.au)

**WA SOUTH COAST:** Samudra run yoga and surfing retreats in Dunsborough. [www.samudra.com.au](http://www.samudra.com.au)

#### How has your meditation practice played a role in your surfing career?

It has been the main thing that has taken me to the next level. I thought meditation was for vegan bald guys in red robes. But I tried it 10 years ago with a teacher named Ron W. Rathbun. I'm a very practical person, and I won't do something if it doesn't work. I don't have time. But it made sense to me. It was very simple and practical. Now, meditating 20 minutes a day is my routine. I wouldn't still be competing today if it weren't for going to that class.

#### Why is that?

I was going through some hardships a decade ago. I was fit and doing physical yoga five times per week but I wasn't very calm and I didn't have much space in my life because I didn't have space in my mind. I felt like my career was stagnating, I was not in good relationships, I was stressed and I wasn't inspired. Inspiration comes from your heart, not your brain, and meditation helped me find that inspiration again. My ranking on the tour improved, but it wasn't just that. I just started living better.

PHOTOGRAPHY: SARAH KEHOE

## wave dancer

No one seems more destined to bring yoga and surfing together than SHIVA REA. Named after a powerful Hindu deity by her surf-obsessed father, Rea spent much of her first four years playing at the beach close to their Southern California home. A move to Berkeley made daily surfing impossible while growing up but once the Pacific Ocean was again in her front yard (she lives in Malibu), Rea started surfing year-round, even in chilly January when, she says, the "surf stoke" keeps her warm. She leads yoga-surfing retreats in Costa Rica and Hawaii, and has created a popular yoga and surfing DVD called Surf Yoga Soul.

#### Do you consider surfing a part of your spiritual practice?

One thousand and eight percent. Wave riding is a deep spiritual transmission of the pulsation and wave energy that is the essence of life.

#### Has surfing affected your yoga practice and your teaching?

My entire orientation to living yoga is about realising waves of consciousness as the underlying flow of all manifest reality. This translates physically as being able to feel pulsation and the flow of the fluid body, almost how people who have been out at sea feel that they have sea legs. Surfing and yoga complement each other, because they both hone and tone the fluid body.

#### Have you had any transformative experiences in the water?

Meditating for epic sunrises and chanting the Gayatri between waves. Surfing with dolphins right here in Malibu. Rainbows and sunsets while full moons are rising...there are so many experiences that they have all merged. The number-one reason to surf is to experience some of the most beautiful moments in nature you will ever have.

