

## Strike a Pose

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**Want a fitness routine that can increase your flexibility, tone your muscles—even calm your mind? Step onto a yoga mat and just say "om."**

### Yoga Resources

I'll admit it: I've been a bit of a slug lately. A tight deadline schedule had zapped my post-work energy. I was so exhausted, that any free time I had automatically began to translate into a vegfest in front of mindless VH-1 marathons. I was waking up in pain and could swear that the hunched position I assume at my computer all day was becoming permanent. I knew the disciplined stretching yoga offered would be just what I needed, but I have to admit that I worried I wouldn't enjoy the classes. I hadn't taken a yoga class in a while, but from what I remembered, the easy leg-to-head, backbend-to-the-ground stretches bored me.

Well, it turns out, five years and one major back surgery later, those stretches aren't so easy anymore. Yet, despite my struggle with certain postures—or asanas—I was hooked after the first class. Not only did I feel an immediate difference in my flexibility, but an all-over sense of calm settled within me when practicing this ancient art. Each class was like a quality deep-tissue massage but without the hefty price tag.

To the novice, yoga can seem intimidating: a jumble of foreign terms and weird positions. But getting started is easy. Most classes are built around hatha yoga, a combination of poses, breathing, and meditation. Within that tradition, however, different styles have emerged, as developed by various gurus. Bikram yoga, for example, works in a heated studio, while ashtanga yoga builds strength through flowing movements. If you're looking into a studio that offers a variety of styles as well as levels (most offer levels I, II, or III), call ahead and an instructor will be able to recommend a class in line with your fitness level and goals.

The following is a list of the most prominent studios and teachers in and around the county. To help you narrow the field, each studio lets you pay by the class and has mats available for your use. Hopefully you'll have better luck than I did. After seven very different sessions, I still can't decide which I like best!

### **THE NEW AGE CENTER, Nyack**

The best way to begin my journey, it seemed, was with the woman who helped spread the yoga revolution in Rockland. Paula Heitzner, who trained many of Rockland's most notable instructors, still teaches (at age 69) six two-hour yoga classes a week. And every class is different. Heitzner

is an advanced kripalu instructor (a spontaneous, meditation-oriented form of yoga), but is also skilled in many other specialized disciplines.

However, Heitzner's intimate understanding of the human body is what makes her most special. Over the years, she has studied other holistic healing practices such as reikian therapy and bio-energetics. "I teach yoga through the psychological aspect," Heitzner says. "You've got to clear the garbage out. If you just want the physical, go to the gym. Knock yourself out."

Heitzner invited me to her Thursday-night class at Nyack's New Age Center, where eight other men and women spread out across a hardwood floor. With the fading sunlight streaming in through various windows and bouncing off the exposed brick walls, I felt as if I'd been let into a secret yoga society. Every week Heitzner alternates between sitting and standing classes—this week we're on our feet. Heitzner is meticulous, devoting attention to the smallest, most forgotten parts of our bodies, like our arches and toes. I can feel the tightness in my hamstrings and calves limiting me, but Heitzner only encourages as she drifts across the floor correcting postures and saying, "Beautiful, just beautiful. Thank you."

I realize how bad my balance and flexibility have become when Heitzner has me stand on my left foot while reaching back to grab the arch of my right foot with my right hand. No problem! I could hold this all day. But then she challenged me to bend forward, extending my left arm by my ear while arching my back and lifting my right leg toward the sky. Well, I must have looked like a chicken, because Heitzner had to steady my wobbly left leg and push my right knee back behind me. By the end of the exercise I was able to hold the position steadily on my own.

Frieda Rubin, of West Nyack, is familiar with Heitzner's gentle touch. "I've been with Paula over 20 years," Rubin says. "She's wonderful." Rubin, who is 80 years old, attends classes twice a week. I'm impressed with how supple I feel after class, but seeing how youthful and limber yoga has helped keep Rubin might be yoga's strongest selling point yet.