



Virtual Yoga

Melissa Albarran explores the growth of virtual yoga retreats

Times are a'changing in the yoga community. Where once upon a time you would study directly under an experienced yoga teacher, now trainee teachers find themselves perched in front of a Zoom (other software programmes are available) taking notes from a trainer who could well be teaching from halfway around the world. But while live-streaming may work well for this form of yoga e-learning, other aspects of yoga tradition are something not even Zoom can replicate.

Retreats have long played a part in said yogic tradition. First witnessed in religious orders, the practice of travelling to remote locations to engage in deep meditation has long been considered a means to greater reflection, spirituality and enlightenment. In more recent times, yoga retreats have become less an opportunity for spiritual enlightenment, more the chance to unplug from the constant demands of modern society and to dedicate uninterrupted time to yoga.

Indeed, as society becomes overwhelmingly tech-based, escapism in the form of physical retreat is growing in popularity. From 2015 to 2017, wellness tourism experienced a 6.5% increase in revenue growth. Yet despite the health benefits, travelling abroad is not always a possibility. The unprecedented spread of Coronavirus has demonstrated the precariousness of our travel system.

So the question is: How can we continue to enjoy retreats, when flying off to distant lands is not an option?

Virtual reality yoga retreats are making headlines, allowing each attendee to enjoy the incredible scenes of Santorini without leaving the house. Is this the answer to cabin fever? Depending on your mood, you can choose to practice your Sun Salutations in a serene forest or picturesque mountainscape. The effects of which may well cultivate the meditative calm sought out by regular retreaters.

For those looking for a sense of escapism, virtual retreats may well be the answer, permitting the user the opportunity to remove themselves from daily stressors.

Carrying out your Savasana with headset in place may also resolve modern eco-anxiety. As the global population faces a climate emergency, we must all look at how to reduce our carbon footprint. Avoiding flights to faraway retreat centres seems an obvious solution, and hey, if you really miss the plane journey, you can even travel VR style.

Yes, it certainly seems the answer to multiple human concerns... and yet it lacks the communal aspect so valuable to yoga retreats. Introspective as they may be, retreats create a space for like-minded people to connect with each other, fostering meaningful relationships among individuals who otherwise would not have met. It is through thought-provoking conversations that I have most deepened my self-awareness and my practice evolved. If online game stations can set up multiplayer games, is this the next step for virtual reality retreats? (Playstation, Xbox, please get in touch.)

Of course, it may be that Virtual Reality yoga, like many trends in the wellness world, 'doga', 'gin and yin' and 'beer yoga' to name a few, may just be a passing fad. However, I cannot help but think this may be here to stay. After all, teacher training courses, once held exclusively in person, are now being carried out online with ease and, let's face it, who doesn't love a 15-minute YouTube flow after a busy day?

Where the world is evolving at an unprecedented rate, you can catch me escaping it all, practicing Pigeon pose on a picturesque mountain in the Himalayas, headset firmly switched on. 🧘

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