

# *Learning to*

# BREA



Damara Ganley practices sunrise yoga at Tulum. [Opposite page](#): a morning class in the Yoga Pavilion at the Maya Tulum Wellness Retreat & Spa



YOGA AND THE YUCATÁN PENINSULA — AN UNLIKELY PAIRING — WERE MEANT TO BE TOGETHER SINCE THE DAWN OF TIME

# AYURE



BY JIM CORNFIELD

*photographs by* CARLA ROLEY

*B*arreling up the Yucatán Peninsula on Mexico's Highway 307, I have to confess that, while I'm not a very "spiritual" guy, I'm feeling the thrill of a little mystique in the air. Scientists tell us the Yucatán was the epicenter of the great "K-T Extinction" — a prehistoric catastrophe so

sweeping in its consequences that it might make this sprawling slab of limestone the most important place on earth.

I'm riding shotgun in a minivan, along well-tended asphalt that cuts through the horizon-spanning jungle of Yucatán's Caribbean coast, in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo. This is the fabled and much fawned-over "Mayan Riviera," south



of Cancún, and I've just spent the better part of a week here, immersed in an intensive introduction to what I once would have thought to be a very *non*-Mayan practice.

Yoga.

Ten thousand miles from where the ancient Hindu practice originated, yoga has become something of a local passion and a vigorous little industry. Yoga “experiences” of every stripe — hatha, kundalini, vinyasa flow, “power yoga” — are woven into the fabric of tourism on this sunny Caribbean expanse of jungle and sparkling, sandy *playas*, including yoga-dedicated hotels, spas, retreats, and classes. Cruising north, with the brooding ruins of Tulum receding in the distance behind me, I'm beginning to sort out why yoga melds so well with the sensual ethos of this land of the Maya.



### THE CATACLYSM

Imagine this crucial moment, 65 million years ago: A huge, barren chunk of space debris has lurched into our planet's magnetic field and is about to collide with the edge of the peninsula's limestone shelf. Creatures within sight of what will soon be ground zero, many of them enormous, loose-jointed reptiles, may not even see the object's approach. They don't scan the skies for weather changes or interstellar rocks, let alone *this* monster — one of the most

gigantic outer space intruders to ever smash into the surface of our young blue planet.

Students of this cataclysm will tell you that if you could have stopped the meteor's descent and held it in place on the ground for a moment, an airplane passing over at 30,000 feet would have had to climb upward to avoid it. But the idea of stopping it is pure fantasy. The meteor obliterated the area that now surrounds Chicxulub Pueblo in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo, gouging a crater roughly 110 miles wide in the earth's surface and creating the geologic event known as the K-T Extinction.

K-T is scientific shorthand for the boundary between the Cretaceous and Tertiary periods. In the long, twilight darkness that followed the impact, 75 percent of all species on the earth — including the dinosaurs, who had reigned as masters of the planet for 160 million years — withered into oblivion.

With the end of the great lizards' dominion, a group of tiny, resilient creatures began to emerge from the undergrowth and flourish. They were the mammals, and the door was now open for the laborious process of natural selection to eventually produce the forerunners of our own race. In short, humanity is probably a direct, if distant, byproduct of the K-T meteor collision.

This is powerful mojo for some serious yoga practitioners.

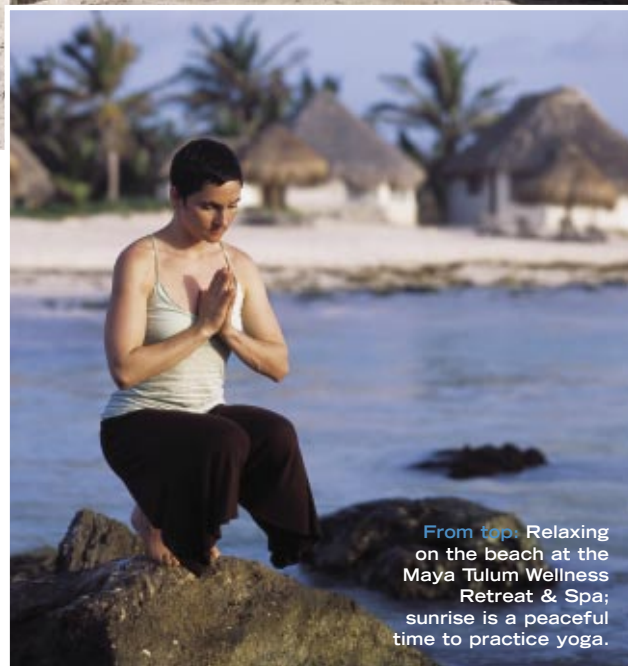
It confers the anointed status of a “power vortex” on this vast Caribbean promontory. I'm personally not big on ideas like power vortexes, but I'll readily concede that this place makes a seductive locale for a meditative discipline like yoga.



### CIRCLES AND SHAMANS

Flash forward about 10 geologic epochs, give or take a million years. My companion on my return drive from Tulum to coastal Playa del Carmen is Keith Christopherson, a Canadian emigré to the Yucatán. Keith is general manager of the elegant, but earthy Maya Tulum Wellness Retreat & Spa ([mayatulum.com](http://mayatulum.com)) and a student of yoga *and* Mayan lore. With thousands of hectares of photosynthesizing greenery — zacate grasses and almond, ceiba, ramón, and toxic chechim trees — emanating oxygen around us, our conversation turns philosophical on the subject of breathing. *Pranayama*, or breath control, is one of the bedrock





From top: Relaxing on the beach at the Maya Tulum Wellness Retreat & Spa; sunrise is a peaceful time to practice yoga.

notions of yoga. *Prana* — embodied by our breath — is seen by Yogis as a universal life force. In the cosmology of ancient Mayans, the similar concept of *ik* was believed to be the force that animated the universe.

After a weeklong immersion, I have become profoundly conscious of how breath control affects the state of your body and your sense of well-being. This perception might just be the greatest benefit I've derived so far from yoga.

"*Respire profundo*," purrs the soft voice of Carla Robert, a sleek, raven-haired Mexican yoga instructor. "Breathe ... deeply." As she pads among the participants in her afternoon class under the soaring thatched roof of Maya Tulum's open-air yoga pavilion, Carla's voice is a soft obligato against the sounds of birds and the rhythm of the nearby surf.

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This particular session is a vinyasa flow class that links together a continuous series of postures and stretches, called asanas. The effect is more kinetic than other, more meditative styles of yoga. A glance around the floor at my startlingly limber fellow yogis confirms that my flexibility is maybe a

3 on a scale of 10. Either that, or most of these people are from another planet.

Yoga instructors, I'm finding, are uniformly gentle and supportive of my effort. Their advice, to a guy who isn't exactly supple, is pretty much along the lines of, "Don't worry.





Arielle Thomas Newman helps in the search for *samadhi*. [Opposite page:](#) the door of the Alhambra

**“MY PERSONAL GOAL IS TO *experience the perceptible* PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS OF THIS PRACTICE, SANS THE QUASI-CEREBRAL NEW AGE PRATTLE OF WHAT I CALL ‘LEOTARD YOGA.’**

It takes time.” I’m still fairly clumsy with many of these postures — my self-image conjuring up the frightening vision of a linebacker in a tutu — but they seem to get a little easier at every session. With my body struggling to hold a pose called *trikonasana*, the triangle, I (barely) rotate my head upward to complete the asana and gaze at the spectacular circle of ceiling: interlaced fronds supported in the center by the hefty, towering trunk of a ceiba, the Mayans’ sacred tree.

Like most of the buildings at Maya Tulum (including the airy individual cabañas) the yoga palapa has a circular motif. This invokes another of those yoga/Maya connections. One yogic fundamental posits that the body’s “psychospiritual”

energy resides in centers called chakras, from the Sanskrit word for wheels. Circular imagery also governs the act of meditation. Mandalas are circular geometric figures used to help focus the mind during meditation, and often they suggest actual repetitive patterns in the physical world — rotating galaxies, solar systems, atomic orbits. One significant shape reflected by mandalas is the circular Mayan calendar, which still puzzles scientists with its precocious astronomical accuracy.

My final encounter with a circle motif at Maya Tulum is indirectly Mayan in origin: the *temescal* or “sweat lodge.” The structure itself, which can accommodate about six people, is a



low, round brick dome with a well in the center that holds glowing, fiery hot stones, and a small vent in the ceiling. In other words, a large oven. If the temescal experience were yoga, it could be promoted as yoga with the side benefit that you can bake bread in your bare hands.



### YOGA BY THE SEA

As the van peels out of the jungle and onto the streets of lively Playa del Carmen, I feel a distinct tingle of homecoming. This sun-washed little town is where, five days earlier, I began my personal voyage of discovery to Yoga-land. On the surface, it's a model Mexican beach city, a tiny fringe of suburban commerce surrounding the immaculate sun-and-surf district — open-air palapas, restaurants, hotels, souvenir shops, and the perennial clusters of quite obviously healthy young people.

In Playa, near the whitewashed courtyard of the Alhambra Hotel, I reunite with Arielle Thomas Newman, who's been my yoga mentor and guide since I first arrived. An intimate gem of a beachfront hotel, with a sparkling *ambiente* somewhere between East Asian and Moorish, the Alhambra ([alhambra-hotel.net](http://alhambra-hotel.net)) is home to Arielle's popular Yoga by the Sea program ([morethanyoga.com](http://morethanyoga.com)).

As an incorrigible skeptic, with some admittedly negative preconceptions about yoga, I couldn't have gotten luckier than finding Arielle in my search for an intelligent, articulate instructor. A UCLA graduate with a professional dance

background and the rangy physique of an athlete, she is superbly equipped to launch me on my personal quest for *samadhi* (Hindu for a state of bliss).

My personal goal is to experience the perceptible physical and emotional benefits of this practice, sans the quasi-cerebral new age prattle of what I call "leotard yoga." This usually involves lots of "universal oneness" and murky talk about "energy pathways." Arielle's teaching technique mostly skims above all that. It's direct, rational, and straightforward. If she's got some unspoken design to connect you with a "higher earthly power," you'll probably recognize on your own when you've achieved that state.

In Playa del Carmen, Yoga by the Sea classes are conducted in the Alhambra's penthouse studio, overlooking the Caribbean. We begin with a sort of entry-level version of hatha yoga, which is built around the union of opposing forces, symbolically reflecting the sun on one hand, the moon on the other. A forward bend is followed by a backward bend, an extension by a contraction, and so on, all of it governed by the ubiquitous engine of the breath, guiding the body toward a sense of balance. To my relief, none of this involves the frightening ramrod headstands I've seen, or that fearsome standing half-lotus

## Cancún's Beaches Are Back

Hurricane Wilma barreled through Cancún almost one year ago, leaving the hot spot in need of some serious fixing. Nine months and more than \$20 million later, Cancún's beautiful beaches and top-notch hotels are up and running, and better than ever.

The seven-mile strip of beach that Wilma's winds swept away has been replaced with 96 million cubic feet of Cancún's signature soft sand, dredged from the ocean floor. The project finished up in mid-April, surprisingly ahead of schedule. City leaders say that rebuilding that beach was an opportunity to revamp others that were damaged by years of erosion and other natural problems. From El Pueblito Beach to Avalon Bay, Cancún's beaches are now wider, whiter, and even more pristine — beckoning new and returning tourists to visit.

Beaches weren't the only spots getting a facelift — many hotels and resorts along the coast were refinished, upgraded, and enhanced. The Gran Meliá Cancún hotel features a newly restored beachfront, a pool area with Balinese-style huts, and a completely renovated Mexican restaurant with a sushi lounge. Its sister hotel, Paradisus Riviera Cancún, has revamped its Reef Grill restaurant, adding a new deck.

With Wilma's remnants disappearing and the opening of newly refined and restored resorts, Cancún's rebirth is promising. Many hotels are offering deals to celebrate the reopenings, in the hope of luring vacationers back to the area. In addition, Continental has reinstated flights between the U.S. and Cancún and is operating at 100 percent of the available capacity pre-Wilma.

— Kristin Burnham



pose, with the body supported on one leg, and the other leg torqued up beside the opposite hip. That's not to say that the biophysics of even the simpler asanas are easy for me. I'm a prisoner of my weight lifting- and roadbike-tensed musculature. But with the slow, rhythmic retraining of my breathing reflex, the gentle relaxation of my joints starts to sink in after a couple of back-to-back sessions. I'm definitely in the right place for serious exposure to yoga.

Later in the day, I join another class at the tony Ikal del Mar ("Poetry of the Sea") resort in nearby Xcalacoco (ikaldelmar.com). Ikal is an intensely private hotel and epicurean spa with individual cabañas spaced throughout thick, carefully tended jungle accented with draecena and garish red flowering bromelias. You can explore the grounds and scarcely encounter another guest, even though the hotel is often filled close to capacity. The menu of massage options (including a nocturnal moon massage, a chocolate massage, and a gravity-free hammock massage) and exotic herbal and aquatic wellness treatments is copious. Ikal is quite obviously the ultimate voluptuous honeymoon destination and a perfect self-indulgent "chill-out" escape for harried high-end executives.

Newlyweds make up most of the hour-long class Arielle conducts here. This is more of a power yoga class, an Americanized version of vinyasa flow that gives participants the exertion of a conventional workout along with the relaxation component and other benefits of Hatha yoga.



### THE ISLAND OF WOMEN AND BACK

Isla Mujeres is a short ferry ride from the bustling docks of Cancún, 45 minutes by car from Playa del Carmen. Centuries ago, the Mayans made the little island a sanctuary for the fertility goddess Ixchel. When 16th-century Spanish explorers arrived for their customary looting and plundering, they found so much statuary depicting Ixchel that they named the place the "Island of Women."

Today, it's another favorite Quintana Roo beach destination, with a dollop of geographic hoodoo that's got to thrill the local yogis: this is the very easternmost point in Mexico.



The small stone ruins of a Mayan observatory that stand at Isla Mujeres' southernmost tip are the first Mexican real estate to feel the sun every morning. Which makes this colorful little island the ideal spot in Mexico for performing the



kinetic vinyasa known as *surya namaskar* — the sun salutation. This short routine, part of every yoga class I've thus far experienced, works practically every muscle and joint in the body, beginning and ending with the hands in the familiar prayer position.

At the island's opposite end is the elegant beachfront hotel Na Balam ([nabalam.com](http://nabalam.com)), the "House of the Jaguar." Here, I join yet another yoga session with the resident instructor, Sabina Tamm ([sundreamers.com](http://sundreamers.com)), a jovial expatriate from Cologne, Germany. Some of Sabina's specialties

— astrological charts, tarot card reading, and "rebirthing" ceremonies — lean toward the ethereal. But her yoga sessions, using rhythmic sounds of the nearby sea to help participants contemplate their breath and heartbeat, are physically energizing. Again, she stresses breathing as a healing and relaxation tool. "When the body feels tension," she advises, "breathe into the area of the tension. Direct your breath to that spot."

Na Balam's general manager, Manuel Gosende, is a dedicated Yogi and a serious free diver. Understandably, he reveres

his Cuban countryman, Pipin Ferreras, holder of the underwater breath-holding record (7 minutes, 20 seconds). Manuel understands better than most of us the extraordinary benefits of yoga breath control. Every night, before retiring, he lights a few candles in his home and performs a private yoga session. "It helps me sleep," he says. "It aids my digestion and, most importantly, it increases my underwater time."



#### THE SERPENT AND THE WIZARD

Back on the mainland, in the Alhambra's yoga studio, I'm ready to amp up my yoga exposure with a session of kundalini yoga — a notch beyond the gentler disciplines I've experienced so far. Waning light on the sea outside the window and the soft collective humming of a mantra — *Ong namo, guru dev namo* — suggest that what's coming is some serious stuff. The instructor is a delicate French woman named Monique dressed in ceremonial white — a Sikh turban and a flowing Kurta pajama outfit. Her routine is far more static than the vinyasa flow workouts I've gotten used to.

We proceed from one asana to the next with studied deliberation, and the individual postures are intense. As I understand kundalini yoga, it supposedly concentrates your mind on summoning energy from your spine — aficionados like to call it "serpent power" — then releasing it through your breath. The poses are controlled and surprisingly taut. The archer pose is a good example — a

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**"I'M DEFINITELY IN THE RIGHT PLACE FOR SOME *serious exposure* TO YOGA."**



The Nabalam hotel. Opposite page, from top: Grand Cenote, near Tulum; an artisan shop near the Nabalam





Top: The Jungle Room at the Ikal Resort in Playa del Carmen; bottom: Clay massage at Maya Tulum Wellness Retreat & Spa

Downstairs, I'm treated to one of the Alhambra's truly wondrous offerings — a Mayan massage at the hands of a wizard named Abel. This is a luxury tour of your own senses that lavishes the body with cold oils, heated stones, and strokes with branches of powerfully aromatic eucalyptus and rosemary, artfully accompanied by a kind of sonic hologram that Abel creates with a little tape player, moving from one ear to the other. His Mayan ancestors would be impressed. When he comes to the almost imperceptible touching of his palms against your skin, his rap is now familiar to me. "Respire profundo," he whispers, before pulling his hands back rapidly in a gesture symbolizing the extraction of your body's pains.

With my body by now in a contented semi-liquid state, I attempt a farewell dinner in Playa del Carmen. I'm the guest of Alberto Lizaola, a saber-lean devotee of kundalini yoga and the owner of Yaxche Maya Cuisine Restaurant ([mayacuisine.com](http://mayacuisine.com)), a Mayan-themed restaurant that's also something of a local center for cultural revival. The garden dining area is patterned after a Mayan temple, and the cuisine consists of elegantly embellished versions of native Mayan dishes:

epazote shrimp, *tikin xic* (marinated fish), broiled lobster with flambéed *xtabentun* fruits. My evening at Yaxche ends with one of those bizarre "small world" encounters that makes me wonder about the mystic power of this part of the planet. An old scuba diving buddy from California wanders by on the street, and drops over to say hello. (I'm sure he's in Yucatán to explore the famed *cenotes* — crystalline subterranean springs that lace the peninsula. They're popular venues for snorkelers and serious cave divers.)

"How's it going?" he chimes. "You down here to dive some cenotes?"

"No." I tell him. "I've been learning to breathe."



*Jim Cornfield is a frequent contributor to Continental.*

**Getting There:** Continental offers daily nonstop service to Cancún from its hubs in Houston, New York/Newark, and Cleveland. Continental offers service to 30 destinations in Mexico, more than any other carrier.



[continued from page 79] muscular, Brad Pitt–style photo op, with legs and arms firmly tensed as if you're aiming your long-bow at the infidels, all the time breathing through your nose.

Breathing, as always, is the guiding motif, and it reaches an exhaustive climax with the "breath of fire" exercise. Here, you're seated, back straight, drawing and releasing breath deep from your stomach muscles as fast as you can. You'll never be more acutely aware of the machinery of your own respiration.