The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Yoga Journal Celebrates Its First 10 Years in Russia

By Lara McCoy

May 28, 2015



Yoga Journal's annual yoga marathon, which takes place every year on June 1, was held twice on Red Square.

To celebrate its 10th anniversary this spring, the Russian edition of Yoga Journal didn't make plans for a huge party, or even a special yoga retreat. Instead, the magazine marked the milestone by launching an extensive analytical survey of yoga in Russia and its practitioners, which appears in the May/June issue of the magazine. The study, conducted by Yoga Journal with marketing company TNS Russia, showed that yoga in Russia today is both a widespread activity and a serious business.

More than 1.3 million Russians practice yoga — more than play basketball, tennis or hockey, according to the survey, and practitioners are a fairly elite group. Three-quarters of them are middle or upper class and 64 percent have a university degree. Half of them are between 16 and 34. And they spent 41 billion rubles on yoga last year.

The growth of yoga and Yoga Journal in Russia is not something the magazine's editor Ellen Verbeek could have foreseen when she went to San Francisco to get the Russian rights to Yoga Journal from the American publishers.

"In Russia at that time there were very few studios, maybe four or five. You had basically the Iyengar community and the Ashtanga community. The people who did yoga were extremely serious, but it was not popular," Verbeek said.

Yoga had been forbidden during most of the Soviet era because of its association with Hindu religious practices and even after the fall of the Soviet Union, the practice was slow to develop.

"I did my first yoga class at the Indian Embassy 25 years ago," Verbeek said. "They had it there."

By the time of Yoga Journal's fifth anniversary in 2010, however, the landscape had changed significantly.

The magazine's staff made the decision to host international conferences under the Yoga Journal brand from the very beginning of its publication. Russia was an exotic destination then, and foreign teachers were excited to come and see the state of yoga in the country, Verbeek said. In 2009, Yoga Journal Russia invited B.K.S. Iyengar, the founder of the Iyengar school of yoga, to lead a conference in Moscow.

"He was already 90 then and it was his last trip to the West — well, from India this is the West — and it was a huge event, and from all over Europe people came," Verbeek remembers.

If the conference with Iyengar put Russia on the yoga map internationally, two important events the following year showed the expansion of the practice closer to home.

In its fifth-anniversary issue — May/June 2010 — Yoga Journal featured a story about the Yeltsin family's yoga practice.

"I had at that time an Iyengar studio in Zhukovka [an elite Moscow suburb]," said Verbeek, "and the Yeltsin family started to take teachers from my studio to do yoga. So for our five-year anniversary we had the whole Yeltsin family doing yoga. We had a photo of Naina Yeltsina doing a shoulder stand in the issue."

The association with the Yeltsins gave the magazine more than a fascinating photo essay.

Verbeek had been trying for some time to organize a yoga marathon on Red Square, but had not had much luck breaking through the bureaucracy.

"This was my dream — to do yoga on Red Square. After we had this issue, the next year we got the permission to do our marathon. We do our marathon every year on June 21 — International Yoga Day. Now we do it at a different location now but we did it twice on Red Square."

The yoga marathon is one of two annual events Yoga Journal hosts each year. The event, which consists of 108 sun salutations performed over approximately four hours, raises money

for charity. Participants can register on a special website and ask people to sponsor them for the session.

The magazine also hosts a major international conference every fall, bringing the best international teachers to Moscow. This year's event, in October, will feature American yogi Briohny Smyth.

"All the teachers we invite find the level of students in Russia really high because people are serious here," Verbeek said. "They are more serious than Americans. They don't go once a month; they go three times a week."

All that practice adds up. According to the Yoga Journal survey, the average practitioner spends 2,500 rubles a month on yoga classes and seminars, although the numbers change depending on the length of time someone has practiced yoga. A new student may spend as little as 9,000 rubles a year, while a yogi with more than a decade of experience averages 30,000 rubles annually.

Verbeek said that the costs of running a yoga studio remain high, however, particularly in Moscow, because of the property values.

"The yoga business in Moscow is very difficult because the rents are so high. You lose on that. I think all the studios struggle," she said.

Verbeek sees more potential for future growth in businesses that are associated with yoga, such as clothing, accessories and organic or vegetarian food.

"In America, yoga is a multibillion-dollar business, but mostly because of the clothes, the interest in healthy food. I think it will all grow, because in the end, Russians are no different."

Contact the author at artsreporter@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/05/28/yoga-journal-celebrates-its-first-10-years-in-russia-a46900