

IS YOGA FOR YOU?



Teresa Brownlie is a yoga student at RiversZen in Astoria.

More information about local yoga studios

Living Fit Yoga
livingfitnw.com

RiversZen Yoga
riverszenyoga.com

Seaside Yoga
seasideyogaretreats.com

Yoga Namasté
yoganam.com

Astoria Arts and Movement Center
astoriaartsandmovement.com

Cannon Beach Yoga Arts
cannonbeachyogaarts.com

The Hot Spot Yoga and Massage
hehotspotyogandmassage.com

Relieving pain, reducing stress, increasing coordination — all this, and North Oregon Coast yoga studios are also a welcoming community to all

Story and photos by DWIGHT CASWELL

What comes to mind when you hear the word “yoga”? An esoteric spiritual practice that involves twisting the body into uncomfortable positions? Yoga is much more down-to-earth than that. There is a spiritual aspect, and there are postures to be assumed, but in speaking with yoga instructors on Oregon’s North Coast I discovered that the reasons for doing yoga are practical and the results are often remarkable.

Instructors invariably have stories of permanent relief from chronic pain. Kristin Tschannen, founder of Seaside Yoga, was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis as a child, and her life became one of pain, deterioration of her joints and strong medication. A friend recommended yoga for both physical and emotional repair, and after a few weeks she was making real progress. Today Tschannen is all but pain-free. “You can ignore pain,” she says, “but what you resist, persists. It’s not the same as getting to the crux of what’s happening with your body.”

At 342 10th St. in Astoria, there is a sort of Yoga Central. There are three instructors at Astoria Arts and Movement Center, on the second floor of the building, and Ute Swerdloff, who does the “Stand Up and Stretch” episodes on KMUN 91.9 FM, has Yoga Namasté one floor above.

Jude MatulichHall, an AAMC instructor, found yoga helpful in dealing with the pain of her scoliosis, and teaches a “relax and re-

store” yoga class based on “integrative yoga,” that, “focuses on bringing yoga into anybody’s life, whether they are dealing with chronic pain, illness or injury.” Most yoga studios offer “gentle” and “restorative” classes that provide modifications for students, so that yoga is accessible to everyone. These include chair yoga, with a set of postures suitable even for people with balance problems or those who lack the strength to stand, blocks and bolsters to support the body, and straps to provide resistance.

Yoga involves a series of postures, simple at first and more complicated as you progress, in tune with slower and more relaxed breathing. This stimulates the body’s “natural relaxation response,” MatulichHall says. “When it kicks in, it raises the body’s endorphins, which relieves pain and relaxes the nervous system, which reduces stress. When you drop stress, many things happen, including an improved immune system.”

Not only does yoga relieve pain and stress and improve the immune system, it can improve posture, balance, coordination and flexibility. It’s no wonder that yoga classes are proliferating. Astoria’s RiversZen Yoga began four

years ago and has been expanding ever since. Today, 16 instructors offer 36 classes, seven days a week, starting as early as 6 a.m. and as late as 8 p.m., in everything from gentle yoga to meditation to resistance stretching. There’s even a new weight room.

Dave and Peggy Stevens, owners of RiversZen, were both dealing with injuries when they took up yoga. The results were not only impressive, they were rapid. “I was 53 and a broken man,” says Dave, and “I thought, ‘It can’t be this easy.’” By now, he says, “We’ve seen some real miracles that go beyond medicine and traditional physical therapy. It’s a humbling experience.”

“It’s very important to us that yoga is accessible to anyone, because it’s done so much for us,” Dave adds. RiversZen offers classes for cancer survivors and two free community classes. If you wish to sign up for regular classes, you get to take as many classes as you wish for one day, for free. Theoretically, you could take seven hours of free classes on that day — but if you’re in that good shape you’re probably already teaching yoga.

Yoga studios grow caring and encouraging communities. “You develop friendships and ties,” says Jeane Robinson of Living Fit Yoga

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Jude MatulichHall is a yoga instructor at Astoria Arts and Movement Center.



Most yoga studios offer “gentle” classes that provide modifications for students, such as blocks, bolsters or chairs. Here, Terrie Powers teaches a gentle yoga class at Astoria Arts and Movement Center.

in Seaside. “We support each other, and there’s an understanding that in yoga you meet people where they’re at. The greatest thing you can learn from yoga is kindness, to ourselves, our bodies and the world.”

Still, there are those who, despite their need, don’t consider yoga. Sally Anderson, a RiversZen instructor, says, “Most of the resistance to coming to class is fear-based. They fear that they will be judged by other students.” She suggests that students talk to her, and perhaps have a private session first.

Christen Alsop, of Cannon Beach Yoga Arts, gets around this resistance, especially in men, by calling chair yoga “Yoga for Golfers.”

Alsop taught in various venues for a decade before opening her studio in 2011. “We have an older population in Cannon Beach, and we get a lot of visitors, so our emphasis is on restorative yoga and classes for beginners,” she says.

Because of the location, Alsop’s studio is also a retreat center that offers weekend events featuring instructors from far and wide. This finds its ultimate expression in the Cannon Beach Yoga Festival, founded by Alsop. Almost 200 people attend, and the classes show the diverse ways yoga can be integrated into life, including yoga for kids, Bollywood dance, yoga figure drawing, and yoga for addiction and recovery.



Sally Anderson, center back, teaches a yoga class at RiverZen in Astoria.



Terrie Powers, center, teaches gentle yoga classes at Astoria Arts and Movement Center.

For those new to it, yoga can be confusing, even intimidating. There’s the terminology, like Hatha yoga (emphasizing holding postures for short periods) and Vinyasa yoga (emphasizing flow of movement with the breath). There is a staggering variety of classes with descriptions that may seem odd to the uninitiated. It’s even possible to practice yoga at temperatures of 110 degrees — which “increases blood flow, providing more blood and oxygen to be delivered to the musculoskeletal, lymphatic and endocrine systems” — at The Hot Spot Yoga and Massage in Warrenton.

Just don’t worry about it. Go to a studio. Talk to an instructor. Forget your fitness or body image issues. Yoga is a supportive and accepting community. Teresa Brownlie, a student at RiversZen, had taken yoga online for years but wanted something more. She told me, “I was so scared when I went to my first class, but they were so nice!”

Yoga isn’t just for those suffering chronic pain or needing to be more flexible. As Christen Alsop says, “I practice yoga to help me live my life in a manner more attentive, more gracious and more fun.”