

Stillness in the Roam

The founders of Yoga Adventure champion the traveling life, in oneness with nature

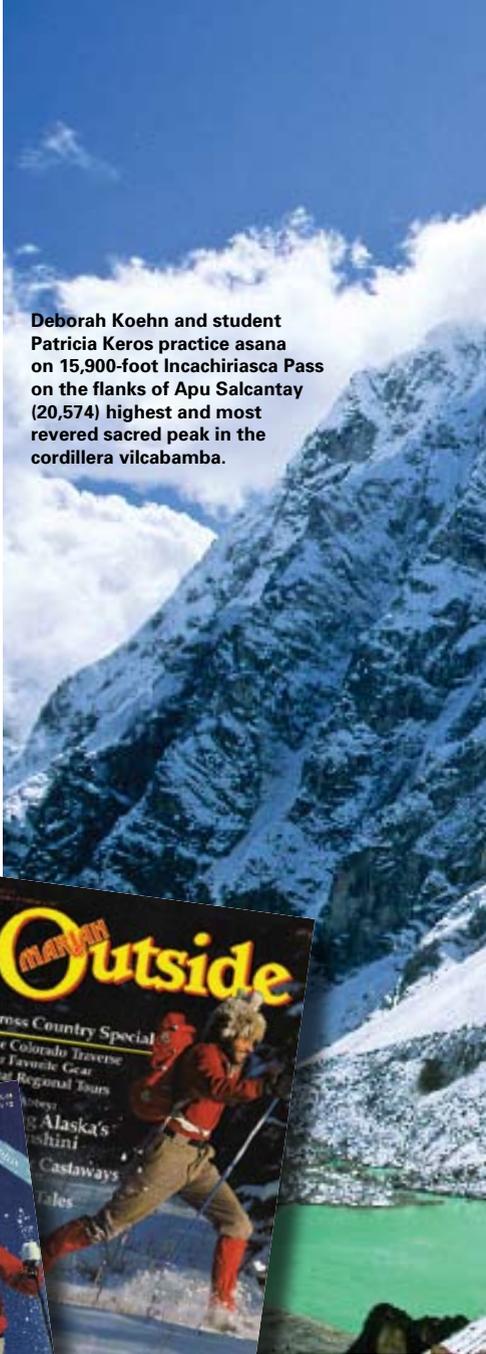
by Teri Wingender

When yogi/adventurer/tribal traveler Deborah Koehn met expedition climber/telemark skier/backcountry expert/photographer/boatman/travel guide David Blehert in the early '70s, it was a match made in Nature. In a tiny Balinese village, a sixth-generation yogi and *manku* (healer) blessed their union in a sacred fire, earth, water, and air wedding ceremony. Since then, Deborah and David founded Yoga Adventure and have led thousands of seekers through the mountains, jungles, deserts, rivers, and oceans of nearly every continent, sleeping under the stars and deepening the experience of yoga.

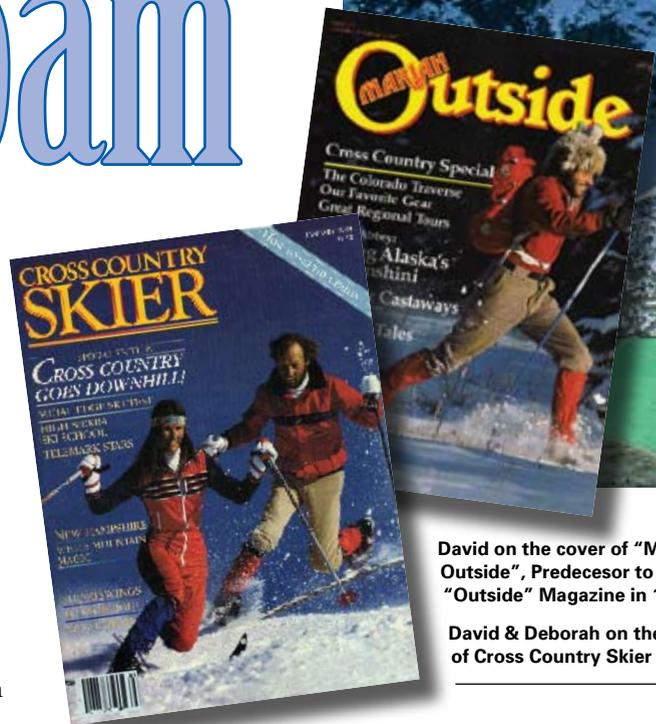
"Different places provide different pieces of us at the chakra level," says Deborah. "Peru, for example, is earth chakra, the root and the heart. Bali is more etheric, more

like you breathe it than feel it." When the couple's daughter Alison was born in 1985, the little family didn't miss a step, hiking nine miles to a remote hot springs for her baptismal water ceremony. The world was her classroom. As Alison, now an award-winning USC film-school grad, puts it: "Elephants 101, Safari Interactive, Climbing Mount Everest, Balinese and Hula Dance, and Photography 24/7."

"Adventure travel teaches us trust," says Deborah, who holds a master's degree in sociology, dance, and



Deborah Koehn and student Patricia Keros practice asana on 15,900-foot Incachiriasca Pass on the flanks of Apu Salcantay (20,574) highest and most revered sacred peak in the cordillera vilcabamba.



David on the cover of "Mariah Outside", Predecessor to "Outside" Magazine in 1976.

David & Deborah on the cover of Cross Country Skier in 1981.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BLEHET; MAGAZINE COVERS BY DAVID BROWNE

eastern religions, and was the first woman to climb and telemark-ski the highest peaks in Peru. “It teaches us presence in the moment and the acceptance of what is. It keeps us wide-eyed with the innocence of a child and shows us the myriad possibilities for beingness on the planet.” David, whose master’s degree is in experiential education, says it’s not only nature but the third-world people who heighten the experience. “They’re still holding the light,” he says. “They’re so much fun to be with, and they’re so open. When you enter a village, they will just walk up to you, very lovingly. They want to see your child; others want to make food for you and eat with you; others want to trade; and there is always a healer or spiritual leader. In our culture, we are going through a huge rebirthing pro-

cess. Cultures who have lived this way through millennia are our teachers, and we need to listen to them now.”

Teaching from nature

Yoga Adventure trips range from high-end, five-star extravaganzas with celebs and CEOs to budget-conscious expeditions with students. This spring, Deborah and David are planning a yoga/surf adventure in Costa Rica, followed by a yoga retreat in Maya Tulum, Mexico. In May, they will lead a Yoga Adventure in Machu Picchu, and in June, Deborah offers a Hawaii Big Island teacher-training and 200-hour Yoga Alliance certification. “My approach to teaching comes from nature,” relates Deborah, whose style reflects more than 30 years of study in the traditions of

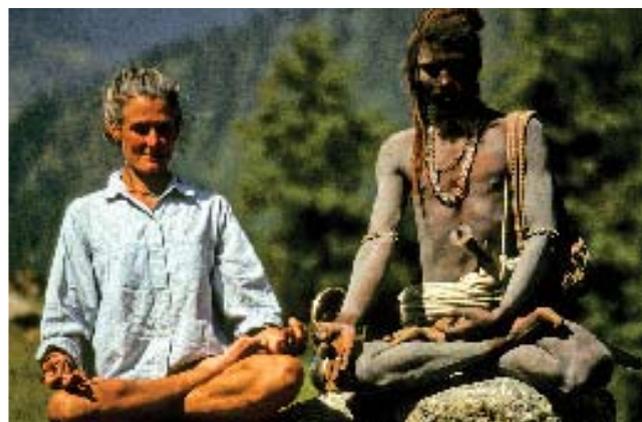


Above: Yoga class in camp below Salcantay Peak, Cordillera Vilcabamba, Peru

Right: Deborah introducing daughter Alison to a rock climb on a trek in the Cordillera Blanca of the Northern Peruvian Andes.

Below: Deborah and a Sadhu (holy man) in Northern India.

Bottom: Alison Teal with young Rhajastani friends near Pushkar India.



Iyengar, Ashtanga, vinyasa flow, therapeutic yoga, meditation, pranayama, and yoga philosophy. “I always compare the energetics of the body with rooting and growing, the pranic force in nature. When you’re doing yoga next to the ocean, you don’t have to say ‘Let yourself experience the water element in your body’—you’re feeling it.” She loves finding out who people are as yoga teachers, not imposing a style onto students. Explains Deborah, “It’s about watching for three weeks, getting to know this girl who teaches break dance and hip-hop in her sleepy little town in North Dakota, and you know she just gets them going! Who can she be, this firebrand? I want her to be who she is.”

Deborah found her own path to yoga in 1968 on a trip to Mexico, as a student of Indra Devi at her ashram. “When I started with her, my gut said, ‘Yoga will save the world,’” she says. She later studied in India and names Angela Farmer and Victor Van Kooten as teachers who inspire her. “People often say they were drawn to Yoga Adventure to do the teacher training,” says Deborah. “It’s like a divine choreograph; somehow, people in the group needed to meet each other. I always find myself thinking, ‘Where did you people come from? I just turned 56, and I feel I can say this for sure now. You can be in the moment and you can trust and you can watch for the magic. It really happens.’”

Extreme spiritual

Every adventure group has its own “oneness,” and Deborah and David can sense who will practice and play well together. “We let people know yoga adventures are very close to the earth—you’re going to see ants and spiders,” says David. “They’ll say, ‘That’s just what I want,’ and you know this person’s going to have fun.” (After that, they trust in the aforementioned magic.) He recalls his younger days as a trekking guide assigned to a group of seniors: “My first instinct was, ‘No way!’ but they turned out to be my favorites,” he says. “They were so full of love and compassion. So appreciative that I was sharing this experience with them—I had never felt so honored. We can learn from third-world people how to honor our ancestors. They live in the present, but they’re aware of the continuum going back and going forward. It returns us to something that is intrinsic.”

Yoga Adventure has evolved from “personal growth” and “extreme physical” adventure to “extreme spiritual,” as David calls it. “The more Deb and I matured in our love, the more we were able to become like the Dalai

Lama in any situation. I always think, 'What would he do?' Then, you're in a space where it becomes sacred. You have that opening to love and compassion."

David and Deborah have witnessed many transformations on their trips. Some adventurers get in touch with what they really want out of life. "When you get away from usual routines, the kids, the jobs, the making money, then the pain comes—the tears and the anger that you haven't been doing what you really want to do," says Deborah. "When you get through all that, what happens next is clearer, and you get the support you need. Then, doing it is nothing."

Other adventurers don't realize until later what they came for—and sometimes it's a big surprise, especially on the yoga and surfing trips. "In Bali, some people come for surfing, others for the spiritual," explains David. "But sometimes, a surfer will say, 'I thought I was coming for the waves, but this healer really touched my heart.' Or a yogi comes to advance her practice but falls in love with the waves. People go through so many layers of themselves learn-

"We're all here for something on this earth, and if we all can find out what that something is and just do it unconditionally and lovingly, what else is there to do?"

ing what flow is. You get in the water and realize you're resisting it—and the ego comes up, the competitiveness, other people get in the way. It's an incredible meditation. It's only going to be your wave for that instant and will never be there again. There's no groundedness other than what you have in yourself."

Deborah and David themselves have experienced that kind of transformation. "When we'd want the next phase of our lives to unfold—because we're manifesters, right?—we'd go out for a three-month trek in India, or a two-month trek in Peru," explains David. "And because of the reflection of nature and the reflection of ourselves in nothingness, we'd come back with total clarity. There was

no confusion, no interference from cell phones and garage-door openers. In nature, you open a space for clarity to come in."

A world of healers

David notes that spiritual places are elevated in the countries they visit. "In Peru, the gods live in the peaks; in



Top: Deborah experiences sunrise meditation in the fabled lost Incan City, Machu Picchu, Peru. **Above:** Deborah with Tibetan “Lamus” (traditional trance healers and channelers) sucking the bad energy from her broken foot. **Below:** Deborah practicing with Sharath, grandson of Sri K Pattabhi Jois, founder of the Asthanga practice. Mysore, India. Deborah enjoys sunset meditation in the Himalayas.



Bali, they live in the summit of the volcanoes, and in Tibet and in Nepal, the monasteries are built on these incredible promontories,” he says. “They’re power places and somewhat unreachable, so there’s a mystery to them.”

In each country they visit, healers, many who come through a lineage as long as seven or eight generations are part of the experience: Peruvian *curanderos*, shamans, Tibetan lamas, Balinese Balian, Hawaiian kahunas, Native American and Mayan medicine men and women, Indian yogis, *sadhus*, and Ayurvedic healers. “They are knowers and seers because they’re not blocking it,” says David. “Layo, a Balinese healer we know, is like a walking MRI. We all have healing gifts inside ourselves on some level, and it’s a matter of clearing the space to enable it to come through.”

“On one of the Peru trips, one of the shamans we’re really close to looked at someone in our group and said to me in Spanish, ‘This woman is in so much pain, she must let go of what is happening with her son,’” relates Deborah. “The woman asked me what he was saying, and, of course, these shamans are so loving, he wanted to do a healing ceremony with her immediately. So I told her, ‘He’d like to do a little work with you...around your son?’ And she started crying—her son had a major bipolar illness. The shaman did a ceremony on the spot. Those kinds of things always happen.” Deborah currently serves on the faculty of the University of Minnesota medical school teaching about yoga and the benefits of time spent in nature as a healing modality.

Home in Hawaii

Although most of the time they’re on the road, David and Deborah call a remote beach in Hawaii home—their Hale Kai (ocean house) where they also host retreats and teacher trainings. “Our home was inspired by our family’s travels in the Peruvian Amazon, Andes, Bali, and old Hawaiiiana,” notes David, who built the environmentally sustainable home in the style of antique ceremonial buildings from the island of Timor and 400-year-old recycled teak. A Balinese altar to the ancestors, coconut and bamboo furniture, tropical gardens, hand-painted batik bedcovers, and hand-carved wooden and stone statues of Buddha, Ganesha, Hanuman, Kuan Yin, and Saraswati evoke the sacredness of place. A round, open-air yoga space on the ocean has room for 12 to 15 students to practice asana and 20 for meditation or kirtan gatherings.

“Our approach is about keeping in balance,” says David. “We all reflect what we have around us and the things coming at you through the Internet, phones, and TV aren’t necessarily in balance. We offer people a way to bring them into a relationship with nature while they do yoga, practice meditation, and eat well. It gives them a balance to reflect off of to help them make a life change that brings clarity.”

Finding the stillness

How does a yoga couple cultivate stillness while always roaming? “As soon as we get somewhere, we try to get into nature as soon as possible,” says David. And they keep streamlining what they carry. “Think about any time you were away for a while, and you realize that all you needed was that favorite shirt and sarong,” says David. “You become relaxed with having less.”

continued on page 93

Stillness in the Roam

continued from page 90

On the trail, David and Deborah work with the local people to procure supplies. Prepared in camp, food includes tempeh and tofu as well as locally produced fare. "We'll carry a backpack of herbal teas or a bag of fresh oranges, and we really go out of our way to find steel-cut oats, quinoa, potato, and taro," says David. In Machu Picchu, for example, the mostly vegetarian diet comprises Peruvian potatoes made like a tortilla, quinoa soup with fresh vegetables, pumpkin soup with ginger. "In each country, we are with families we've known for over 20 years," he adds. "We've watched their kids grow up, and now they help us on the trips."

"As soon as we get somewhere, we try to get into nature as soon as possible"

David and Deborah see traveling long into their future. "We're coming into a part of our lives where we realized we've touched a lot of people," says David. "One astrologer said we have 30 more years of traveling ahead of us. We're all here for something on this earth, and if we all can find out what that something is and just do it unconditionally and lovingly, what else is there to do?" 

Both Deborah Koehn and David Blehert have taught for Outward Bound Schools and developed international staff trainings and programs for children, teens, special women's courses, corporate courses, and programs for juvenile offenders. David's photos are regularly featured in catalogs such as Patagonia, North Face, Eagle Creek, Teva, and magazines including *National Geographic*. For more information, visit www.yogaadventure.com

Herbal Healing

continued from page 50

of Connecticut School of Pharmacy showed that 200 mg taken daily for four weeks could improve aspects of mental health and even social functioning.

University of Toronto researchers found that subjects who took 3g of American ginseng either 40 minutes before or during a glucose test meal experienced a 20 percent reduction in blood sugar levels compared to taking placebo capsules.

A recent study in the *Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness* (June 2005) found that 2g of ginseng taken three times daily over eight weeks increased aerobic exercise duration in seven healthy men. Other research shows that ginseng treatment (100 mg) can also protect injured muscles after exercise. More studies are in the works.

Is it really ginseng?

Ginseng is available commercially in many forms, some better than others. Research from the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy found 29 percent of randomly purchased products claiming to contain ginseng did not have any significant amount of the herb, and another 27 percent contained amounts so low they couldn't offer any substantial therapeutic value. Reports have found that nearly half of the 19 ginseng supplements tested either lacked the herb entirely or were contaminated with pesticides.

"Standardized extracts only focus on specific compounds and act more like a drug than a balanced herbal medicine, and powders lose much of their effectiveness when processed," Redmon explains.

"The ginseng root has many

compounds that act like a check and balance system. You can't just focus on certain aspects. You need everything ginseng offers for it to be the most effective."

How to use ginseng

Redmon suggests making decoctions from organic cultivated ginseng roots available at your local Chinese market. These haven't been exposed to pesticides, which may disturb ginseng's nutritional value, nor have they been tainted from any processing methods.

Place a medium-sized root in a full pot of water and bring to a boil. (Avoid aluminum or Teflon as this can contaminate the tea.) Reduce to a simmer, cover, and cook for 30 to 45 minutes. Pour out the liquid and save the tea in a container. Fill the pot again and repeat the boiling and simmering process. Then, combine the first and second batches to make your decoction. Sweeten to your taste (a higher concentration often has a somewhat bitter flavor).

A daily cup or two, up to 10g of root per day, can boost your energy and brain, help combat sickness, and soothe digestion. "Gauge how you react and drink more or less as needed, or make teas that are more or less concentrated," says Redmon. You can store your ginseng decoction in the refrigerator for up to a week. You can also add the roots to your regular cooking. Put some slices into your soups or as you sauté vegetables, or make ginseng ice cubes from your decoction and add to your regular tea. You get the same benefits, but in a different way—and much better than anything a Pepsi can offer. 

Matthew Solan is a freelance writer in St. Petersburg, Florida. (www.matthewsolan.com)