



Anita Modok on The Ganges
Photo by Duncan Rice

MOVING INTO STILLNESS: CONNECTING WITH THE DIVINE



Participants from 101 countries outside Parmarth Niketan Ashram, Rishikesh

Photo credit www.internationalyogafestival.com

With the abundant selection of yoga festivals being run annually in exotic locations around the world, it can be overwhelming trying to select a yoga festival that is both authentic and accessible.

The International Yoga Festival (IYF) is this and more. Embodying the authentic roots of the Yoga Sutras, the Bhagavad Gita, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and other sacred texts, this festival embodies the ancient threads of yoga for an international and contemporary audience.

Situated on the banks of the Ganges River, nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas lies Rishikesh; the birthplace of yoga and the home

of the annual International Yoga Festival.

Each year thousands of modern day pilgrims from all walks of life, cultures and from all corners of the globe are drawn to the festival to celebrate and reunite with themselves and like-minded others; to practice and learn from international yoga schools and traditional yoga lineages.

With its prime location on the banks of holy Ganges the IYF is held annually in the first week of March at the Parmarth Niketan Ashram, the largest ashram in Rishikesh, and spiritual home to thousands of pilgrims who flock here.

With over 1000 rooms, the Parmarth Niketan Ashram accommodates yogacharyas, teachers, yoga practitioners, new students and everyday people from all walks of life with a wide range of interests from around the globe. Diversity abounds.

Originally started in 1999 by Uttar Pradesh Tourism, H.H. Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati (Pujyaswamiji), President of Parmarth Niketan Ashram and world renowned spiritual leader, is the inspiration behind the IYF. With his vision, blessings and leadership he has built this successful festival along with Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati, the Director of the festival and the President of the Divine Shakti



IYF 2017 - Yoga classes from world-class teachers

Foundation. Between them, they also manage many other charitable initiatives and foundations.

In 2017 more than 1700 people from

101 countries came to sit by the banks of Mother Ganga, and absorb the divine energy and wisdom of saints, sages and rishis who have meditated and practiced yoga here for centuries.

There is something quite unique about this festival. This is more than a festival to practice and learn yoga; the festival itself is yoga, where diversity is celebrated, where yoga becomes a divine union of the east and west and where the science and art of yoga merge as one.

IYF registration includes the full range of classes, lectures and performances along with meals and accommodation. This transformative week invites everyone to participate in the extensive timetable led by some of the world's greatest yoga teachers from the East and the West.

The tightly run schedule of activities can be intense but rewarding. Classes run from 4.00am till 9.30pm and participants can attend a wide

range of inspiring, educational and uplifting classes from hatha yoga, ashtanga yoga, Iyengar yoga, raja yoga, jivamukti yoga, kundalini yoga, power vinyasa, kriya yoga, bhakti yoga (devotion), gyan yoga (wisdom), karma yoga (taking yoga off the mat and into service of the world), yoga nidra, somatics and tai chi as well as attending spiritual lectures, meditation, kirtan, pranayama, philosophy sessions, daily satsangs and listening to the divine words of revered saints and spiritual masters from India. Last year more than 70 presenters, from 20 countries delivered nearly 150 classes.

Simultaneous classes are run, providing a rich and varied selection of subjects, practices and presenters. You need to be organised and prepare the classes you want to attend in advance, as the class locations are spread widely over the ashram and sometimes classes reach capacity, especially in the yoga halls.

Classes are held in a number of locations within the ashram including the Aarti Ghat on the banks of the flowing Ganga to various yoga halls. Classes on the Ghat are large but practicing any type of yoga on the Ganges is sacred and memorable. Performing artists and musicians feature here most evenings after the divine Ganga Aarti celebrations have finished.

The evening Aartis on the Ghat and the ashram gardens are definitely a highlight. The abundant grounds are beautifully maintained with many religious statues scattered throughout the rambling gardens providing a clean, pure and sacred atmosphere.

Ganga Aarti begins daily just before sunset and draws a diverse crowd of locals, tourists and spiritual seekers alike. The reverie and energy experienced at Aarti is intense during the festival and crowds are

at capacity but as you imbibe the evening bhajans, teachings, puja and ceremony led by Guruji, a sense of atmospheric calm soaks deeply within, filling you with a deep sense of inner peace. You can even let the cool waters of Mother Ganga wash over your feet, to transform and erase worry and stress or just watch the flower blessings flow down the river.

If you want to, you can meet the spiritual leader Pujya Swamiji for Darshan or arrange a private one-on-one session.

While staying at the ashram, it's important to remember to be sensitive and respectful of the Indian Hindu culture. For women and men, it is important to dress modestly, especially during the Aarti. Shoulders and knees need to be covered at all times, including in classes, so filter the western urban yogi look while you're here. See-through clothing is not allowed, and tight/revealing clothing is also discouraged. White is the colour of choice. There are many local vendors who can help supply you with appropriate clothing or kirtas.

The ashram also has an Ayurvedic and Panchakarma Centre where you can choose from a range of treatments or have a consultation.

Uttarakhand, previously known as Uttaranchal is frequently referred to as the land of the Gods because of the numerous Hindu temples and pilgrimage centres found here. Accordingly, it is mostly a vegetarian state.

With vistas of the majestic mountains, dining facilities include two large marquees set up in the yoga gardens for all participants. Food is abundant, however the queues for food can be long during peak times. The food is vegetarian, with gluten and lactose-free options available

during meals. Vegan options include dhal, rice, salads, vegetables and fruit.

Meals include a light breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and snacks as well as dinner. Food is also available outside of the ashram where there are many restaurants to choose from. It is recommended to take a few non-perishable options such as protein bars or nuts.

Accommodation is included in the registration and is provided from 2pm on February 28 until 12pm on March 8. Separate arrangements can be made if you would like to stay before or after the festival. Rooms vary in size and location and are basic and clean. Showers are certainly not five star and can be a bit hit and miss. The plumbing and electricity can be eccentric and the wi-fi is practically non-existent. These rooms are basic spiritual simplicity at its best.

Sheets, blankets, and towels are provided and a daily laundry service is available for a minimum fee. Filtered water machines are generously provided throughout the Ashram. The ashram has security and the gates close at 10pm.

Moving beyond the ashram walls to explore Rishikesh, the "City of the Divine" is a must. Legend says that Rishikesh, named after Raibhya Rishi, made intense tapasya (austerity) here to please lord Vishnu.

Unique and large, this sprawling city, weaves along the banks of the holy Ganga, steeped with a rich, layered spiritual and cultural resonance. This is the 'go to city' for spiritual awakening. Long considered a place for spiritual study, the sacred energy of this holy place continues to attract modern nomads, yogis and yoginis long since the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, The Beatles and the sixties hippy trail left town. It is no surprise

that pilgrims are still drawn here from all over the world.

The meandering roads are lined with orange-robed sadhus, cows, monkeys, stray dogs, bustling stores and vendors selling locally produced arts and handicrafts and fresh produce. Rambling streets on either side of Ma Ganga are scattered with holy shrines, ashrams and cafes. Lakshman Jula and Ram Jhula are suspension bridges connecting both sides of Rishikesh. The locals are friendly and generally this is a safe place to explore. There are many day excursions available including trekking, rafting and jungle safaris to see the local wildlife including tigers and elephants or take a dip in the holy waters of the Ganges.

So what is it about this event that makes it so special? Although

enlightenment is not guaranteed, the opportunity to be in the presence of and guided by revered saints, yogacharyas and teachers to gain a deeper understanding of our own divine and true self is a rare opportunity. It is often only in hindsight that we can truly reflect on the profound impact a journey into new spiritual territories like this can make upon us.

When so many of us struggle to navigate our modern day stresses, the spiritual abundance imbibed at the IYF reminds us that there is more to yoga than strength and flexibility; and that through yoga we can find health in our bodies, peace in our minds and joy in our hearts.

By moving closer towards clarity, peace and love, we are invited to realign and shift our purpose, and

find the true union or "yoga" of body, mind and spirit in a place that the Uttarakhand logo says is 'Simply Heaven'.

Rishikesh is accessible by car, plane or train. The festival is jointly organized and hosted by the Parmarth Niketan Ashram in association with the Ministry of AYUSH, (Department of Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy), the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board and GMVN, the authorised travel agents for Uttarkarand.

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