



# Conscious Lifestyle

With Guest **Juanita Nieuwoudt**

## SLEEPING WITH STRANGERS – BEFORE GOING ON YOUR FIRST YOGA RETREAT... READ THIS

The road to your first yoga retreat probably starts with a reluctant or even mildly apprehensive attendance of a first yoga class. This turns into a regular once or twice a week session at what you come to describe as “your” yoga studio with “your” yoga teacher. After a while, you feel the benefits of yoga in your everyday life or “off the mat” as the yoga crowd says. You almost feel like you’re a yogi, really.

Maybe, in the fullness of time, your yoga studio will then confront you with an offer of a... yoga retreat.

Most of us are familiar with the concept of retreating under the bed-covers to hide from the cold, weird people or life. But a yoga retreat sounds next level. As a regular yoga retreat participant, I recommend a gentle start to going on retreat; ask some questions before you go...

Who is offering the retreat and where? They seldom hold retreats in inner city locations and so you will head into the wilderness, so to speak; a farm at the very least. Most of us have jobs to return to on a Monday morning, so weekend retreats involving lengthy travel are not a great idea.

Are you familiar with the instructor and his or her yoga teaching style? Are they safety conscious and able to teach people with wide-ranging abilities at the same time? Retreats should cater for all bodies, levels and abilities. Even for those of us who can barely hold a Warrior Two pose any length of time without crying on the inside.

Opting-out of activities or classes should also always be an option. Sometimes a tired body needs a nap during free time, not a “fun” hike up

a steep hill. Repeat after me (three times): My retreat, my way.

Packing for a retreat can be tricky, but it is all about keeping your body happy and comfortable during the retreat, so bring what you need to achieve that. Depending on the weather, you want to layer up or strip down. For some of us comfort means worn-in leggings and an oversized, somewhat manky t-shirt. For others, it means \*famous yoga brand\* clothing from top to toe. There are no rules. You will spend loads of time sitting, yoga-ing and lying down in bliss on your yoga mat. So make sure you can do this without going to war with uncomfortable clothes.



Depending on the retreat location, bedding and towels will sometimes be supplied but check beforehand. You may have to bring some of these items with you.

Other useful items include a meditation shawl, your own yoga mat, and yoga bolster. I can’t imagine a retreat without a light woolen shawl. I use mine during meditation and drape it over me when lying on the floor in Savasana. I also fold it and use it for padding under my knees. Hard floors and thin yoga mats can cause unhappy knees.

But above all, I always bring my mat. Mats are usually available at retreats, but I am totally in love with my mat. I bought a travel mat that folds up in a square and gets packed in my luggage! After using it once or twice in my regular yoga class, I realized that it is a great mat all round, not just for traveling. I feel rock solid and safe on it – no wondering if you are slowly slipping on this baby. You won’t. So now I use it all the time and it’s my best buddy. But being a travel mat, it is thin. So, if there are extra mats at the retreat – nab one for extra support and put yours on top.

If you have a yoga bolster and you can take

it – do it. It has many uses, but also makes a great meditation seat. It gets you off the floor. At yoga retreats, after a while, you will want some comfort away from the floor. If you worry about hygiene, your own bolster is an obvious choice.

You may be asked to bring a notebook and a pen. At the very least bring the pen, if you are not a studious yogi who writes everything down. That way you will have something to write with on the retreat feedback form.

So finally, the retreat weekend dawns. Here are some strategies to make the most of your time at a retreat. You will find that your fellow yogis are kind and inclusive. Enjoy the retreat with no inner or outer expectations on yourself or others. Often, over longer retreats, people report intense mood swings; feeling ridiculously happy the one minute and super-irritated and annoyed the next. A weekend retreat is short, so extreme mood changes are unlikely.

For the sake of maintaining a level of sanity for all, observe any retreat rules. There are always some quirky ones – like not flushing a specific toilet at night because of the noise waking people up.

Apart from lots of yoga, meditation and some social contact– sleeping and eating are two important aspects of a retreat.

The food will differ from what you are used to. It is highly likely to be vegetarian or even its more extreme cousin, vegan. The food will be lovely and everyone will gorge themselves. People will have whispered discussions about pooping. Or not pooping. People get worried when their diet changes and they fall out of their normal rhythm, so to speak.

If silence is held during meals, if people are asked to eat mindfully and in silence – do it. It is a unique, if not slightly unsettling, experience. Whispering softly is not silence.

Ah... the sleeping arrangements. It is almost a given that you will share your room with strangers of the same sex. Maybe even up to three strangers. Just like camping at school. There may even be bunk beds. And spoiler alert! People make lots of noises in their sleep. Snoring, snuffling, coughing, sniffing and whatnot.

People toss and turn in their beds and need to get up at night. A cacophony of noise really. If you are a light sleeper and easily disturbed, I have two words for you – foam earplugs.

While yoga retreats are very relaxed and go-with-the-flow, there are some potential sticky situations you may want to know of.

Do not walk in late to morning yoga. Really. If you can't drag your butt in three minutes before it starts – skip it, sleep in or go commune with nature. Morning yoga on retreats starts early and with a lengthy meditation. Most people find it hard to settle down into the meditation, so if someone who walks in ten minutes late, ever so quietly (no it's not) shuffling around on their mat to get settled... Maybe the Dalai Lama can sit through noisy distractions without batting a meditative eyelid, but the rest of us need all the help we can get.



Mobile phones on silent in your room. Far, far away from the yoga or meditation space.

Because of the spiritual nature of retreats, sometimes people may experience some upset or emotional reactions. It is inappropriate to question people. Some people are intensely private and not willing to share. The best you can do for someone in visible distress is to alert the retreat leader. On this note, you may see people opt out of certain yoga poses or even falling asleep (and snoring) during meditation– be loving, kind and accepting.

Let people be.

After the retreat, spread the love if you enjoyed it. And you will. Share on social media, tell others about the retreat. Support your yoga instructor in that way, so he or she will offer another retreat and others may enjoy the experience just like you did. Namaste!

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