

channeling *of my*  
writer Rebecca Walker  
*inner hippy*

**E**ditors spend much of their time correcting and re-writing other peoples work, tweaking typos and tidying grammar. As the editor of a spa and travel magazine, I have spent more hours than I care to count reading about other people's transformational wellness experiences. When it comes to the magazine's inner retreat section I usually wriggle around in my office-bound chair, seething with envy as one of my writers recounts their latest detox experience or exotic yoga retreat. To remedy this I decided to take myself to Bali for the annual four-day Bali Spirit Festival.

The brainchild of co-founders Meghan Pappenheim, Made Gunarta and Robert Weber, the Bali Spirit Festival was launched in 2008 with the intention of creating a 'global village' community that nurtures creative and spiritual diversity through yoga, dance and music. Merging East and West, the festival's spirit-nourishing workshops lure practitioners and soul searchers from all over the world to the shores of beautiful Bali.





THIS PAGE: Katy Appleton leads a Vinyasa Class. OPPOSITE PAGE: Ojeya Cruz Banks leads students through the steps of an African dance class. OPENING PAGES: A morning meditation class.



**DAY ONE**

Walking into the festival on the first day it is immediately apparent that I have walked smack-bang into the middle of a yoga orgy. With back-to-back classes running from 7.30am to 5.30pm, I am completely overwhelmed by the huge range of dynamic classes and incredible teachers that present themselves on the daily schedule. What's more I am too busy people-watching to make a choice. Wandering around the festivals verdant green lawns are a gorgeous array of fit-bodied folk, all carrying the customary yoga mat underarm. Tattoos are aplenty, as are Thai fisherman pants and dreadlocks, yet the one common uniform is a huge smile. And it's contagious! Within minutes I am grinning like an idiot at any passerby that looks in my direction (and even those that don't). What I am quick to discover is that like any music festival there will always be overlaps – two great bands playing on two different stages at the same time, both of which you want to see. In this scenario it's multiple yoga gurus, dance instructors and musicians simultaneously bending, stretching, breathing, dancing and chanting.

I start my day with a Vinyasa (breath-synchronised movement) class that promises flowing asana (poses) to open the heart. The open-air studio is perched on the second level with a fantastic panorama of the festival grounds and I unroll my mat and drink in the gorgeous view. UK yogi Katy Appleton begins the class and in no time I am downward-dogging and stretching tight muscles while attempting to put my city-brainwaves on silent mode and completely immerse myself in the moment. It works. Katy's soothing teaching style is incredibly endearing and along with the traditional yoga poses, the class is littered with the occasional Sufi poem and some seriously great music that instantly lifts my spirits. What I like most is that she keeps reminding us to smile and enjoy the postures instead of taking ourselves, and yoga, so seriously. A great start.

After lunch I head to what is dubbed 'Zen Thai Yoga', a practice that fuses Shiatsu massage with yoga. Australian instructor, Gwyn Williams begins by asking us to get on all fours and crawl around the room like a baby. We are then asked to adopt the movements of a monkey, then a bear. Moving into a circle, the group is promptly

instructed to rest our left leg on the next person's shoulder and massage the right neighbour's neck while humming. I start to get the giggles; the kind of giggles that start in the pit of your stomach and work their way up. The girl next to me starts chuckling too and I can't contain myself, the laughter pours out of me. Once I start I can't stop and as I try to suppress it, tears of stifled glee start pouring down my cheeks. I am fully aware that laughter is a form of emotional release however don't want to disrespect the teacher or distract the other students so leave the class.

I run straight to the African dancing class in which teacher Ojeya Cruz Banks is demonstrating some rather spectacular dance moves that are somewhat intimidating to a first-timer. Looking around though I am instantly encouraged by the grins of the people around me. Accompanied by a posse of bongo drummers, the hypnotic rhythms swiftly slide under the skin and within minutes we are all throwing ourselves into a routine of legs stomps and arm spins. This is serious heart-pumping stuff and as someone who does not go to the gym I am breathless and sweating in no time yet as the nearly

two-hour class goes on my energy strangely builds to an almost euphoric level. We end the class with some African chanting and everyone around me looks as if simultaneously buzzed and exhausted as I do.

I finish the day by watching US yogi Danny Paradise lead an Ashtanga class. As a yoga student, I have always been a participant, rather than a by-stander so the experience of watching other students practice is new to me. Watching Danny wander around the room bellowing instructions and correcting postures, I can see some of my own alignment mistakes being played out in front of me. An interesting exercise.

**DAY TWO**

I wake up on day two with tender muscles. On an average week I practice yoga three to four times and do zero cardio so I am a tad unfit to say the least. I also know that hours in front of the computer have not been great for my posture and in the last year have developed seriously tight hip muscles and what is commonly known as the 'office slump'.

With this in mind I plan to head to a bounty of hip-opening classes throughout

the festival and I begin day two with a class that promises to 'uncover' the orange and red charkas (associated with the pelvis and feet), with the dual effect of grounding the body and unlocking stiffness in the hip joints through deep twists and balancing poses.

Starting with a chat about energy philosophy, Malaysian teacher Ninie Ahmad talks to us about the links between emotional and physical health – pointing out that imbalances in one, lead to balances in the other. A believer in the power of thought she encourages us to practice each pose with the intention of healing in mind. Taking us through a series of floor-based stretches and standing poses, we explore our flexibility and strength (or lack of). After an hour and a half I certainly feel more length in my stretches and the beginning stages of more aligned hips.

The next class I attempt is called 'Yogic Arts'. Led by ex-kickboxing champion, Duncan Wong, this practice melds principles of martial arts with yoga. Although this sounds great on paper, the teacher's super speedy transitions and intense ninja poses aren't what I'm ready for, so I sit the class out and watch everyone else attempt this

Samurai-style yoga instead. Duncan's teaching method is fast and refreshingly funny and he spends as much time making wisecracks as he does demonstrating his challenging moves.

My next class is another 'Apple Yoga' class with Katy and I am as impressed with her second class as I was with the previous day's session. She leads us through a mellow range of hatha-style postures that allow time for muscles to soften and breath to synchronise with the gentle movements. Keeping in mind most students were a tad over-enthusiastic on the first day, she guides us through poses that stimulate without being over-strenuous. A great soundtrack and inspiring readings infiltrate the session and I finish the class feeling extremely peaceful.

I decide to give my muscles a rest and bask in the sunshine while listening to some ethnic tunes. Sitting in on a West African drumming session I am mesmerised by the delicious rhythms that reverberate through the music pavilion and an hour and a half passes in what feels like 10 minutes.

For my final class I choose a yoga and Ayurveda class led by well-known Ayurvedic practitioner and yogi, Uma Inder.



Focusing on the 'lunar series' this practice claims to balance the nervous system and replenish the body on a cellular level. Incorporating 'yoga nidra', (yogic sleep) the class also promises to enhance rejuvenation and combat stress through full-body relaxation and a deep meditative state of consciousness.

Starting with some breathwork, the class moves into a series of deep stretches that are carried out at a much slower speed to any other class I've attended and the effect is truly exhausting. Alternately saluting the sun and moon through purposeful, methodical positions, I feel the day's activities catching up on me and halfway through the class lie down and fall asleep.

Much to my surprise I wake up 45 minutes later with my yoga mat imprinted on my face. Although I have missed a good portion of the class I feel fantastic and finish the day more energised than when I arrived.

DAY THREE

The previous morning's tender muscles have turned into seriously sore ones and I creak out of bed after an indulgent sleep-in. Deciding to head to the festival after lunch I spend my morning chilling by the pool. Choosing some funky fusion, I select a 'Yoga

Meets Dance' session led by the smiley-faced Chloe Jackson who starts the class by asking everyone what makes their heart 'sing'. Considering how much I have enjoyed the previous day's festivities, the only answer I can come up with is 'festivals like this'. Lane? Maybe, but I am on a seriously ecstatic high and have fallen in love with the heart-lifting atmosphere I am hungrily absorbing.

The class is being held in the lawn pavilion which means grass, ants and other friendly bugs crawl underfoot as we begin stretching sans-mat. Evolving from basic yoga poses to 80's dance moves, it's soon clear that this is going to be fun class and before long we are all dancing freestyle around the lawn. We break into groups and dance in circles. One person stands in the middle and we copy their moves until they tag the next person, all this to the tunes of Michael Jackson. We then split into two groups, one on each side and perform a serious dance-off that leaves us all in fits of giggles.

Throwing a collection of colourful scarves in the middle of the 'room', Chloe encourages us to grab one and use it as an extension of our bodies. At this point I turn into a possessed wanna-be ballerina, leaping and bounding around the room with a goofy grin on my face.

We end the class dancing to Jason Mraz's 'I'm Yours' and I sing the words loudly, closing my eyes and jigging around like a huge uncoordinated dork. It's amazing just how liberating the act of moving to music can be and I leave the class truly inspired to take dance classes when I get home (watch this space).

The next class on my list is a hatha-based practice led by UK instructor Bridget Woods Karamer. Geared towards deep hip openers this Anusara flow class is dubbed 'unfolding the lotus' and promises to unlock even the tightest hip joints. The hips are famous for being a place of stored emotions and our 'seat of power' so opening them can be an emotional as well as physical challenge. As mentioned, my hips are as tight as they come and according to a recent x-ray, my left hip is physically higher than my right, which in yogic terms means major imbalance.

Bridget's straightforward teaching style makes her class easily accessible and with three assistants wandering around the room to make alignment corrections, the atmosphere is a personal one. We go into some of the deepest hip stretches of my life and I hear involuntary moans and groans escaping my lips as my muscles and bones creak into place. At one point I feel as though my



left hip literally clicks down two inches and when I stand up at the end of the class feel a sense of balance that I haven't felt in years.

DAY FOUR

I wake on day four sore but 'light'. I feel as though the lethargy of the previous day's exertions have lifted in my sleep and have been replaced with a serene sense of peace. I decide to attend the Kundalini yoga class, hosted by US yogi, Rebecca Pflaum. Unlike other types of yoga which work primarily on the physical body, Kundalini yoga promotes an 'elevation in consciousness' through a unique sequence of postures (asanas), breathing (pranayama), hand and finger gestures (mudras), body locks (bhandas), chanting and song (mantras) and meditation, which are practiced in sets known as 'kriyas'. By tapping into dormant energy at the base of the spine (Kundalini), this dynamic practice claims to stimulate the muscular, glandular, digestive and circulatory systems.

I have been intrigued by Kundalini yoga since an energy healer told me I should try it about 12 months ago but with the usual 'I'm too busy' excuses, have never got around to it. The class begins with an inspirational talk by Rebecca who encourages us to embrace and own our happiness. Although her words are profound, Rebecca's

lighthearted presence has everyone, including me, smiling and I feel an instant affinity with this woman.

Two instrumentalists guide us into song and we are told to cross our legs and sway in circles to stimulate the sacral chakra (in the abdomen). As the mantra begins I am overwhelmed with emotion. It is as though the entire week's teachings and practices flood over me, and all of the emotions that were previously locked within my body suddenly release. I start to cry hysterically and once I start, can't stop. Simultaneously moved, comforted and unhinged by the chanting around me I succumb to the kind of deep weeping that a person usually reserves for a private moment alone. The yogis on either side of me each place a hand on my back, and I am so incredibly touched that these complete strangers feel compelled to comfort me. The girl on my left encourages me to start singing and as I do I feel a sense of calm washing over me. As the mantra winds down I have regained my composure but still feel incredibly vulnerable.

We move into a series of arm postures that have us swinging from side to side and flapping our 'wings' like birds for what feels like an unbearable amount of time. These gestures connect to the heart chakra and Rebecca laughs at our pain, telling us, 'If you think you can't keep going, you're right. If

you think you can, you're also right. We are all capable of so much more than we think we are, it's up to us to explore our potential.' With this in mind I keep flapping away!

Michael Franti begins blasting through the speakers and we are suddenly encouraged to get up and dance. Everyone jumps at the opportunity and for the next 10 minutes we all sway our hips and throw our arms in the air like crazy people. We then break into partners and sit back-to-back from each other before launching into a series of forward and backward movements, followed by circular ones that are performed face-to-face. We are asked to look into our partners eyes as we sing the mantra and although I would usually find it quite confrontational to gaze into a stranger's eyes for 10 minutes, I find myself smiling and at ease. After a group-hug session, we are asked to lie down in lines and begin rolling around the room like demented human sausages. The entire room is laughing hysterically and we barely have time to catch our breath before we're asked to sit again and begin another series of poses for the legs known as 'frogs'. These hamstring stretches are true agony and by the time we reach number 54 the entire room collapses on the floor.

Rebecca asks us to form a circle and encourages those who would like to receive healing to move to the centre. I do so and

THIS PAGE: Uma Ina; Ninie Ahmad; and Katy Appleton in action. OPPOSITE PAGE: Rebecca Pflaum guides a Kundalini class.







THIS PAGE: (LEFT COLUMN) Indonesian musicians; a 'hoop yoga' class; Yogis chilling by the Watsu pool. (RIGHT COLUMN) Fresh vegetarian food on offer at the Dharma Fair; kids yoga in-action; an impromptu music jam. OPPOSITE PAGE: istockphoto.com illustrations

as the group breaks into the final mantra I begin to sob again. I'm not sure if I will ever be able to properly express what happened to me over the next 20 minutes but I will say that I had an in, and out-of-body experience. One minute I felt as though I was being drowned in grief and the next I was crying with happiness. I lost any awareness of what I might look like to the people around me and tapped into the beautiful energy they were providing instead. I have never felt as safe as I did lying there in that circle and will never forget the experience for as long as I live.

#### BETWEEN WORKSHOPS

Although the day's activities revolve around the workshops, walking around the grounds is a soul-nourishing experience in itself. Whether sliding into the Watsu pool after a sweat-inducing class or lazing on the beanbag-strewn lawn with a fresh coconut, the sense of community that pervades the entire area adds to a friendly neighbourhood vibe. Festival-goers wander around the 'Dharma Fair', a marketplace featuring a range of booths selling handicrafts, clothing, jewellery and delicious Indonesian cuisine. There is also a healing sanctuary so those seeking traditional massages, spiritual advice and holistic interactions can make their way to this relaxing refuge.

Recycling stations are scattered across the lawn and without exaggeration I do not see even one piece of discarded rubbish lying around in the entire four days. Oversized water coolers also reside in each pavilion facilitating free bottle re-fills. This simple, yet generous gesture is just one example of the concerted efforts the organizers have made to incorporate the Indonesian philosophy of 'Desa Kala Patra', a concept that encourages us to live in harmony with our environment and embrace balance in our spiritual life.

#### THE MUSIC

One of the festival's greatest assets is the beautiful overlapping sounds that float between tents all day long. No matter where you are situated, some sort of rhythm can be continually heard and rather than be annoying or distracting, the background soundtrack of bongos and chanting enhances the multi-layered



ambience of the festival.

As each day's yoga class draws to a close, the evening's official music events begin. Starting in the late afternoon, a packed line-up of eclectic world music fills the air with afro-inspired jams, tribal dance music and ethnic beats that have people dancing late into the night. Although I had every intention to attend the night's festivities I find that by the end of each day I am completely and utterly exhausted and it's not until the final night that I muster the energy to go. While this may seem a waste, my ears were drinking in music of some form all day long and I found myself craving quiet time in the evening to let the emotional dust of each day's experiences peacefully settle. That said, the night that I did attend I was lucky enough to see Grammy award-winner Mamadou Diabate play the kora and charismatic African performer, Afro Moses, belt out some booty-shaking reggae and percussion.

#### OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

Waking up on day five of my stay in Bali I feel immediately lost without a day's worth of spirit-soaring activities to attend. The kind of feelings that bubble up during an experience like this – namely, elation, happiness, fear, old grief, euphoric joy, serene peace and a deep sense of connection to the people around you – leave you feeling somewhat dizzy when it's all over. Coming into contact with so many likeminded, smiling people was almost overwhelming at times and as the days went by I felt my Hong Kong toughened mindset melting into a much gentler space.

Gone were the furrowed frown marks that harden my face during concentration, gone was the need to incessantly check my phone and e-mails, gone was the office shoulder slouch and the niggling worries. In their place was a heightened sense of awareness, a feeling of universal connection, mental clarity and the sensation of being deeply grounded and balanced (physically and emotionally). I credit these feelings not just to the festival, but to the healing spirit of Bali itself. There is something so very warm, gentle and nurturing about the island and the people that live there and tapping into that energy – even fleetingly – put a huge smile both on my face and in my heart.

[www.balispiritfestival.com](http://www.balispiritfestival.com)

#### places to eat

Ubud has a fantastic array of cafes and restaurants serving traditional Indonesian cuisine and western-friendly dishes. Here are three of my favourites...

**KAFE:** Incorporating Bali-harvested, chemical-free, organic produce whenever possible, Kafe serves a yummy range of wholesome meals and healthy snacks. Chow down on a macrobiotic breakfast bowl in the morning, a lentil stew for lunch and a red rice nasi goreng for dinner, all washed down with one of the many health-inducing elixirs. Vegetarian and non-vegetarian options are available. [www.balispirit.com/kafe](http://www.balispirit.com/kafe)

**BALI BUDDAH CAFÉ:** Comprised of a huge menu of organic, MSG-free vegan, raw, 'superfood' and vegetarian dishes, Bali Buddah is one of Ubud's most established health cafes. Nibble on a live food platter, indulge in some spelt and walnut pancakes or opt for a simple bagel as you sip on one of their many liquid health tonics and herbal infusion teas. Those detoxing opt for a caffeine-free maca java energiser. [www.balibuddha.com](http://www.balibuddha.com)

**CLEAR:** Clear is Ubud's newest (and trendiest) earth-aware restaurant. With a range of delicious vegetarian and vegan friendly options, their extensive organic menu incorporates dishes such as meat-free tacos, vegetable-laden salads and traditional Indonesian tatak. Try some of the restaurant's signature 'Mylk' – a cashew nut blend with the appearance and texture of creamy milk (without the dairy). **Jln, Hanoman, Padang Tegal Kaje, Ubud ph: 0818-553-015**

#### where to stay

**FOUR SEASONS SAYAN**  
Nestled in the jungle of Ubud's Ayung River Valley, Four Seasons Sayan is an exotic Balinese recluse with all the luxury trimmings. Created with ultimate privacy in mind, each spacious suite and villa gazes out onto beautifully landscaped gardens and the rainforest beyond. Flaunting outdoor showers, romantic four-poster beds, oversized tubs and tastefully decorated lounge areas, each space lends itself to decedent relaxation. If you are craving some top-to-toe tranquility, wander into the spa where the treatments and therapists are second-to-none. [www.fourseasons.com](http://www.fourseasons.com)

**ALILA UBUD**  
Perched on a pretty hillside overlooking the Ayung River, Alila is a secluded retreat on the outskirts of Ubud. Designed to resemble a Balinese village, the resort's traditional Indonesian architecture is offset by contemporary interiors, voluminous outdoor bathrooms and individual terraced gardens. Take a dip in Alila's infamous infinity pool or for an extra dose of wellbeing, head to the spa for a muscle melting experience. [www.alilahotels.com](http://www.alilahotels.com)

#### community outreach programme

"One of the most important aspects of the Bali Spirit Festival is our intention to inspire others to give back to their communities," says Meghan. This heartfelt intention is made real by the founders who, since the festival's inception, have given back to the local community through a number of local outreach programmes. In 2008 they donated USD17,000 to the Bumi Sehat safe birthing clinic; another USD17,000 to the Pelangi Community School in 2009; and will be donating this year's money to an HIV/AIDS awareness programme. "We see this as the greatest accomplishment of all and strongly believe these programmes will have an immeasurable impact on communities throughout Bali."