



# *Ohm* for a Holiday

Writer **Anicka Quin** went to the Kootenay-based Yasodhara Ashram near Nelson to look at the architecture, but a welcome dose of wellness found her there too.





### Curves Ahead

The design of the Ashram was done by John and Patricia Patkau, the Vancouver-based architects who enjoy a world-class reputation for their stunning use of natural materials in their projects.

**M**y cabbie is thrilled that I'm heading to Nelson for the weekend. It's 5 a.m., and I'm groggy and dragging myself into his backseat, headed to YVR to catch a puddle-jumper into the mountains. Small talk ensues and, inevitably, I share that I'm Kootenays-bound for a few days. "There's an ashram there, you know?" he says. When I confirm that said ashram is, in fact, where I'm heading, he claps his hands in delight. "If you do yoga," he says, "you'll never be crying."

The thing is, I have been crying a lot lately. In the past couple of months, one friend has started chemo, a cousin has seen her breast cancer come raging back and another has lost her battle, leaving her four-year-old son behind. The randomness of who gets to be 85 and who must leave before they want to has me just generally pissed off, and I'm not convinced a yoga session or four over the weekend is going to shake that anger. But I don't dig into that with my spiritualized cabbie. "That's the plan," I smile weakly.

To be truthful, my attraction to visiting Yasodhara Ashram this weekend is more architectural in nature: they've just built a new temple with arguably the greatest living Canadian architects of our time, John and Patricia Patkau. Perched on a rocky outcrop of Kootenay Bay, the Ashram is difficult to reach: from Nelson, B.C. (itself

a 90-minute flight or eight-hour drive from Vancouver), you drive a half hour, then take another half-hour ferry to arrive at the 85-acre property. But, from all accounts, their new Temple of Light is stunning. And laying eyes on a lotus-like design in the middle of the woods feels like the shoulder-dropping exercise I could use right now.

I arrive in the early afternoon, and drop my bag in a modest little room with a peek-a-boo view of Kootenay Lake. Despite my architectural mission, I've also signed up for a relaxation workshop, but it doesn't start until tonight. I've got a little time for a ramble.

The Ashram itself—which these days hosts a couple of dozen full-time residents, and yoga students whose retreat times range from two to three days (like my own) to many months—was the brainchild of one German woman, Swami Radha, who studied under a guru in India in the late '50s. That guru's encouragement to bring yoga to the West evolved into this women-led retreat and study centre that practices the spiritual tradition of the Divine Feminine, with that kind of we-produce-our-own-honey Kootenays vibe that's almost instantly calming.

It's quiet here. They're expecting a full house this weekend (about 130 or so people like me who are also looking for that dropped-shoulder moment in a number





### Breathe Right

One of the pillars of a visit to the Ashram is ever-present yoga classes. They're very low-key, notwithstanding they're conducted in one of the most spectacular settings in the country.

of different programs), but I pass only a few guests and residents on my path. Some are crouched over the rows of kale, mixed greens and garlic scapes, harvesting a few handfuls for dinner; a few others appear to be hauling out undergrowth from a forested area. (I later learn they're removing invasive Scotch broom.) And while the acres of apple orchards seem right at home here—they produced some 4,000 pounds of fruit last year—the flowering gardens are a surprise. Everything is in bloom and heavy with bees. It seems so... *pretty* for a place with such serious intentions.

I take a path that climbs a little, walking past a renovated barn (now one of the sleeping quarters) to discover a bench that's been placed just out of the way—but, of course, not randomly. It's perfectly positioned for a quietly framed view of Kootenay Bay below, the grounds of the ashram rolling out in front. I sit, and those shoulders drop just the tiniest bit. I catch a glimpse of the temple, starkly white and modern against the fairly '70s-era scene laid out in front of me.

After taking it in, I return to what's known as Mandala House, the main building on the property where meals are shared and my classes will take place. (The courses here are very reasonable—for a weekend retreat, it's around \$500, which includes three nights' accommodation and all of your food.) The first night I'm told to bring a notebook and wear comfortable, modest clothing I can move in. Our

instructor is Swami Jyotihananda, a tall, slender woman in her late 60s who looks a little like a modern version of Bea Arthur, and whose generally serious, mildly intimidating demeanour is transformed when she smiles to welcome the 15 of us in.

My fellow classmates aren't quite what I expected. There are a few lifelong yogis, for sure—those folks who come wrapped in jersey and seem to have really already nailed both inner peace and the elegantly messy bun. But there's also a family of four from Calgary, whose 11-year-old son takes our writing and reflecting exercises so seriously I want to hug him. There's a recently divorced entrepreneur who has sold his business in the U.K. and is looking to figure out what's next in life. A quietly smiling guy in his 20s whose late father was an ashram regular, a 50-something woman whose perfect manicure and sparkly eyeshadow is as un-hippie as you can get, and another woman taking a sabbatical from her work as a restorative justice facilitator to travel with her family. They're all looking for a bit of a come-down from whatever is eating at them back home.

Throughout the course of the weekend, yoga is just a small part of what we do here. We're asked many questions, which we reflect on, sometimes through writing, sometimes by drawing pictures. What is a single word that expresses relaxation? (Beach time. Wait, that's two words. Water?) What do I need to let go of? (Anger about







#### Circle Time

Another key aspect of the ashram is a variety of workshops where participants can talk through any issues they're dealing with. Here wellness is very much both physical and mental.

the unfairness of life and death, but also the feeling that I need to fix everything.)

We learn the Divine Light mantra, a recitation that sees us visualize light streaming down from above our heads and becoming part of us, and overflowing outward. And, little by little, I hear the words of my cabbie bubble up. My sad and angry heart moves just a little.

Nourishment comes in a literal form, too: though our meals are held silently and in reflection, it's all I can do not to turn to the person beside me and exclaim, "Can you even *believe* this?!" Lunch is laid out over several buffets, and one spread includes bruschetta topped with garden tomatoes, the aforementioned garlic scapes and dill; rice noodle salad rolls with peanut sauce; rich yam and coconut soup drizzled with homemade pesto; and homemade biscuits or, for those in need of it, gluten-free pumpkin-seed crackers. And an always-present garden salad topped with tahini lemon dressing.

After lunch, I have another window of time to myself. A service in the new temple is on the schedule for tonight, but I want to experience the space on my own, first. An electrical fire in the roof caused severe structural damage to the original temple in 2014; it had been a more classic, dome-shaped design, and when it came time to rebuild, one member of the community started to cold-call architects. The Patkaus were on the list. And, more importantly, they were interested. They had a research arm

to their practice that they thought the temple could be constructed under (read: the community might actually afford it) and wanted to test some of their theories around building prefabricated designs in curves, just what the temple was hoping for, too.

The structure is both spiritually significant to the local community—it's designed with eight doors, signifying the eight major religions of the world, along with an aperture at its peak—and a truly stunning piece of architecture. Eight petals curve together to form one dome, and each petal is made of eight panels. It was constructed in highly technical, prefab components in a facility right across the lake by Spearhead Inc., one of the few places in Canada that specializes in this type of design. (A little karmic "in" for the community.)

It's everything I'd hoped it would be—the kind of hush you feel walking into an ancient European church, made modern. Asymmetrical windows frame views out and over the lake, while the aperture above floods in light by day, and is framed by hanging lanterns at night. I close my eyes, and recite one of the Divine Light mantras we were given earlier that day, picturing my struggling friends and family bathed in that light. It feels good. The logical side of me dismisses the fact that I'm "doing" anything. The side that's opening up here, the one that believes a sacred space like this does have meaning—that side of me is grounded by this room.

Above: Laura Vanags; Cabin and garden: Amy Allcock; lunch: Andrej Galic; aerial view of garden: Daniel Segu



#### Back to Nature

There's no zipping out to the supermarket here; instead, everyone participates in the cultivation of the food that will be prepared into the communal meals here. Delicious, but eaten in silence.



The next afternoon we're to meet in the garden to participate in "karma yoga." It's not a bonus downward dog session; to a layperson, it's essentially a straight labour exchange—you're given a task in the garden or on the property, and you contribute your time and physical work for a couple of hours. (One participant who came a day early had turned down the offer to cover his extra costs through a few hours of karma yoga. "I told them I hadn't done yoga before, so I passed," he laughed.)

The term actually comes from the concept of both giving back (karma) paired with a meditation (that's the yoga). I'm meant to stay present and to think about what comes up for me as I tug out invasive grass that's winding under the raspberry canes. Not much, at first, but when we're told that time's up and I have but a few feet left to fully eradicate my row from weeds, oh boy does something start to brew. Does not finishing a task to my standards make it any less successful? It's a thought I twist with for a while.

Near the end of my weekend, I have a chance to speak with Yasodhara's president, Swami Lalitananda—a former pupil of Radha who has been part of the community, on property and off, since the '80s. She's soft-spoken and smiles easily, her short grey hair in curls atop her head, and she's dressed in all blue—the colour they've chosen for the spiritual leaders here, a reflection of the water that surrounds this place. What, I ask her, do they want visitors like myself to get out of our experience here? "That there's more to life," she says. "We have tools to give people so they can find meaning—to take the time to pause and ask, where am I? What do I want to do in my life?"

Those questions settle with me for the weekend and, once I leave the ashram and head back to Vancouver, for the weeks that follow. Months later, I find one of my class drawings. It's not what anyone would call art—or, for that matter, it's not anything that anyone other than myself would comprehend. But there are my feet, stretched out toward the ocean. Sun pours down, and I've got a book by my side. Unexpectedly, the peaceful centre I discovered over that weekend at Yasodhara Ashram rises up in my chest for a bit. I will cry again, I know. But I've got a few tools in my arsenal to help me be okay with that. **///**