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Rafting that stretches the boundaries

By Laura Bly, USA TODAY

ALONG THE CHILKO RIVER, British Columbia — Fingers clasped high above her tousled red curls, yoga instructor Hannah Johansen leans toward heaven — and a haze of bloodthirsty mosquitoes.



By Laura Bly, USA

What a rush: Yoga instructor Hannah Johansen does a warrior pose on a Lava Canyon over

"Imagine a protective egg that will keep the bugs out," Johansen urges the dubious acolytes gathered around her at a riverside campsite. "Bless them. Invite them to stay away. And remember: Thought creates form."

Alas, on this second day of a weeklong yoga/spa/whitewater-rafting trip through the heart of British Columbia, the spirit is clearly weaker than winged nasties hungry for flesh. As the sun starts its own stretch through the cottonwoods and lodgepole pines, a background chorus of gurgling water is pierced by the sound of ragged breathing and creaking knees — and the satisfying thwack of hands helping insects reach the next

On the river

- **Photos:** [Rafting to nirvana](#)

With a new Yoga Journal/Harris Interactive poll showing more than 12% of the U.S. population "very" or "extremely" interested in yoga, the ancient physical regimen has evolved far beyond its humble beginnings in India. (Or salacious case in point: J. Lo showing off her postures and famous posterior in this summer's cinematic turkey, *Gigli*.)

The estimated 15 million Americans who already practice yoga have a dizzy array of options for staying limber on vacation, from spartan, tofu-and-green ashrams to upper-crust Crystal Cruises, which just introduced a shipboard wellness program that melds yoga with tai chi and Pilates.

Among the newest twists is the seemingly oxymoronic pairing of yoga with whitewater rafting, an activity more often associated with sunburned, beer-soaked adrenaline junkies than with centered, sinewy women stretching their way to nirvana.

At least six rafting companies are featuring yoga-themed trips this year, through terrain as diverse as the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho and the tropical highlands of Fiji. They all aim, in instructor Johansen's words, to take yoga "off

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the mat" and teach participants to explore an internal landscape while they immerse themselves in an external one.

The yoga/rafting marriage is off to a rocky start, due in part to those entrenched stereotypes. "A lot of women are interested at first, but they're intimidated when they hear the word 'whitewater,'" says Lisa Gale of Class VI River Runners. The outfit offered, but wound up canceling, two yoga trips down West Virginia's Gauley River earlier this summer.

"It seems like a pretty narrow niche," adds John Abbot, CEO of Yoga Journal. "Yoga and nature certainly go together. But the focus of yoga is inward, and you want a tranquil environment ¼ not whitewater rapids."

But as our admittedly tiny band of yogis and yoginis (male and female practitioners) discovered on a recent yoga expedition down a 130-mile stretch of Western Canada's Chilko, Chilcotin and Fraser rivers, oars and oms needn't be mutually exclusive.

Offered through the popular California-based rafting company O.A.R.S., the trip begins with a flight by small chartered plane to glacier-fed Chilko Lake, one of North America's largest alpine lakes, and winds through an ecological mosaic incorporating pine-covered mountains, sage-laced, million-acre ranches and sandstone hoodoos more reminiscent of Utah than Canada. The centerpiece is the Chilko River's Lava Canyon, a 17-mile swath of nearly continuous rapids considered among the world's most challenging. (The real-life drowning of several American rafters in Lava Canyon provided the inspiration for Alan Alda's 1994 film *The White Mile*.)

The promise of serious whitewater, not morning stretches or shoulder rubs around the campfire, prompted suburban New Yorkers Lois Baldwin, 56, and Jim Fogarty, 57, to sign on for our late July departure. But while Fogarty has opted to steer clear of the trip's yoga/spa component ("my meditation is nature," explains the former marine biologist), Baldwin is hoping to boost the knowledge she has already gleaned from a handful of yoga classes back hc

She's joined by Paul Chang, a 50-year-old Jamaican entrepreneur and avid student who had met Johansen at a yoga retreat a few weeks earlier, and 2 year-old Steve Markle, an O.A.R.S. marketing manager and lifelong athlete eager to "develop my feminine side."

Like Fogarty, I'm more interested in vegging on a riverbank and whooping through top-rated, Class V rapids than in learning the downward facing dog of yoga's most popular asanas, or postures). A veteran of high-octane white on the Colorado and Zambezi rivers, I have nightmares of waking to decaffeinated tea and brown rice instead of strong coffee and bacon — and being intimidated by a Lycra-clad, perfectly manicured guru.

Yoga/rafting combinations feature small groups, but si can vary. All welcome beginners and more advan practitioners.

Here's a sampling of trips o the next few months:

• **O.A.R.S.:** Dates and pric are still being set for next y Chilko/Chilcotin/Fraser Yog Spa trip (this year's price w \$2,595 per person), but O.A.R.S. offers several yoga/spa departures on Ida Salmon River (five to 18 da Aug. 27-Sept. 9, \$1,274-\$4 per person) as well as an e day Highlands to Islands tri Fiji (Oct. 18, \$2,900 per per including round-trip airfare 1 Los Angeles to Nadi, Fiji). / include daily yoga sessions massages, camping, meals 800-346-6277 or [oars.com](#).

• **Yoga Adventures/Bill Dvorak Kayak & Rafting Expeditions:** Six-day Gree River (Utah) yoga rafting tri Sept. 6-11. \$1,760 per pers from Grand Junction, Colo. includes daily yoga session camping, vegetarian meals 800-824-3795 or [dvorakexpeditions.com](#).

• **River Odysseys West:** 1 day, women-only Yoga and Journaling trip through the 1 Canyon area of Idaho's Sn; River, Aug. 25-28. \$1,080 p person includes daily yoga, camping, meals. 800-451-6 or [rowinc.com](#).

• **River Dancers:** Two-day Yoga on the River trip on th Klamath River in Northern California, Sept. 6-7. \$275 | person includes three-times day yoga sessions, campin (tent and sleeping bag not included), meals. 800-926-4 or [riverdancers.com](#).

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I'm quickly put at ease by 56-year-old Johansen, an effervescent, self-descr "hippie mama" and owner of Alpenglow Adventure Spa in Big Sky, Mont. Tr; at the famed Kripalu Center in Lenox, Mass., the longtime yoga teacher and masseuse mixes New Age philosophy with such "only-on-river-trips" vices a pack of clove cigarettes and flask of Baileys. Irish cream (perfect for spiking first cup of morning java).

As Johansen continually reminds us during her twice-a-day, 45-minute sess the body/soul benefits of yoga extend far beyond the confines of a sweaty s — including, in my case, a newfound talent for breathing deeply while inflati air mattress.

And a few of us are grateful to hear that an inability to hold a tree pose for r than a few shaky seconds doesn't mean failure: "There are all kinds of trees saplings to willows to sturdy oaks," Johansen reassures us from her own unwavering perch beneath a canopy of Douglas firs.

Just as Johansen shatters the "yoga Nazi" stereotype, the river journey itsel both more and less than we'd bargained for.

An already varied landscape is made even more dramatic by the constant th of wildfires, which have flared through much of British Columbia this summe share our first night at the Chilko Lake Lodge with a crew of soot-covered, b tired firefighters, and float past stretches of forest still smoldering from a rec blaze.

As our rafts bobble through placid reaches of the Chilko River before hitting Canyon, we marvel at schools of Chinook salmon darting like torpedoes thr sun-dappled water so clear and clean we can dip our bottles for refills — an imperious bald eagles who seem to be leading us ever farther downstream.

By the time we clamber up a steep slope to scout Bidwell, the first set of rap Lava Canyon, we know all about "strainers" and "sweepers" — downed tree branches that can clasp unwitting swimmers in a doomed embrace. We've l river guide Dougie Arnett's sober reminder that "this is not a Disneyland ride learned how to haul a rapids-tossed rafter back to safety.

But somehow, the sight of all that froth and foam sparks something other th; surge of adrenaline we had expected. Maybe it was the "breath of joy" yoga routines we practiced just before shoving off, or Johansen's exhortation to imagine the rafts as dancing yellow corks.

As we enter the maelstrom, giggles replace the warrior whoops of rivers pas And between involuntary shrieks when sun-warmed faces meet a 10-foot w; 40-degree water, we grin like fools — or enlightened gurus glimpsing the Bu nature of life.

Smiles come easily on shore, too.

Our camping experience is participatory and prosaic as well as pampered, v rafters expected to pitch their own tents and join a conga-like supply line as guides load and unload the two 18-foot rafts each day. A warm shower is or occasional luxury, and the small portable toilet — dubbed "the groover" in r; speak — turns unspeakably nasty by the end of the week.

But 48-year-old river guide and camp chef Rex Myers, a compact bear of a who wouldn't be caught dead in Lycra, clearly knows his way around a prop stove. He whips up mouth-watering concoctions that soar far beyond either sprouts and yogurt or burgers and beans, from French toast stuffed with brie strawberries to steak fajitas washed down with British Columbian pinot noir.

The spa portion of the trip includes such decadent touches as an inflatable

footbath, complete with soaking salts and lemon-scented lotion, and a mud administered while drifting down the silty Chilcotin River (think African Queen minus the hippos).

Best of all are Johansen's twice-weekly massages, delivered in a green-and-white striped tent or under the stars.

We've been told the Northern lights are sometimes visible in these pollution- (if not always smoke-free) skies, and I often lie awake late at night, hoping for a ringside seat at one of nature's most spectacular performances.

I get my wish in the unlikeliest of settings: A massage table set up just inches from the hypnotically noisy confluence of the Chilcotin River and Big Creek. Johansen works out the kinks from that day's paddling session, I gaze toward the northern horizon — and spot a band of white light, pulsing in waves that seem eerily reminiscent of those we'd encountered on an earthly plane.

Thought creates form? I'm a believer.

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