

# yoga journal

HOME > LIFE > YOGA TRAVEL, RETREATS, AND FESTIVALS

## How to Host International Yoga Retreats Consciously and Ethically

Yoga and Buddhism teacher Jacoby Ballard shares thoughts on travel and how the compassion and generosity that a yoga practice fosters can help create peace, regardless of where you roll out your mat. You don't have to go far to feel connected to the world.

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When I was 24, I traveled to volunteer in Guatemala, arriving with many good intentions, and radical anti-globalization politics. But I soon found that, due to the economic, race, and gender dynamics that preceded me, I was often viewed as wealthy and expected to either tell locals what to do (about challenges and difficulties that I had no context or skills for) or to dole out gifts (whether to individuals or a community). Over the course of hundreds of interactions, I learned that I would have to remain in one community for decades to become a true partner in change and not be seen as just another imperialist gringo. At the time, my yoga and meditation practice helped me grapple with the disappointing truth that I didn't have the training, support, context, or time to act skillfully in Guatemala.

See also [Leadership Lab: Jacoby Ballard on Power, Privilege and Practice](#)

Shortly after my return to the U.S., I began working for CISPES, the Committee In Solidarity with the People of El Salvador—a grassroots organization that has been supporting the Salvadoran people's struggle for social and economic justice since 1980. At CISPES I received a history lesson on El Salvador and the training and support to do the work that initially brought me to Guatemala. I benefitted from generations of CISPES activists before me and a legacy of trust and profound dialog with our Salvadoran *compas* about social change strategies and practices.

While working at CISPES, I began teaching a weekly yoga class to our staff and that of a few other nearby organizations. Through that offering, I found my work, or my dharma: to support social change workers through embodiment and reflection, to give them designated time to slow down and turn inward, thereby preventing burnout and strengthening their social movements—it is when we are in a state of individual and collective balance that we can be the most tactful, innovative, wise, and ambitious.

See also [How to Become a Group Exercise Instructor](#)

Can Yoga Teachers Lead International Retreats Ethically?

Five years later, in 2012, I led my first international yoga retreat in Tulum, Mexico, after hearing how lucrative it could be, and given the difficulty of making a living as a yoga teacher in New York City. Initially, I felt I had enough reasons to try to lead international retreats ethically, but after five such retreats, it still didn't feel aligned with my values and politics. Unlike with my work at CISPES, I certainly wasn't in dialog with local people and movements, and I wasn't using my privilege in solidarity with the needs of the most vulnerable and targeted people of Mexico. I had no way to evaluate whether my week-long presence on retreats was of actual benefit to the working class and indigenous Mexicans working at the retreat center or those walking the beaches selling coconut water or necklaces. And with more and more American and European presence in Tulum, it felt like I was part of displacement and imposition rather than an equitable relationship.

Such experiences sit in stark contrast to an annual Queer and Trans Yoga Retreat I started leading at the Watershed Center in Millerton, New York, in 2013. This retreat center is devoted to the wellbeing of social justice workers, the health of the land, and it cultivates relationships with the original inhabitants, the Schaghticoke people. Retreaters' food is grown on the queer farm across the dirt road. Retreat center beds were constructed as part of a youth leadership program upstate. And, the Watershed Center posts photos on its dining room wall of a diverse array of retreatants answering the question, "what is liberation?" All of these practices build a sense of continuity, community, and participation beyond just who attends the retreat.

See also [Jacoby Ballard Creates Safe Spaces for Trans Community](#).

Some people travel or retreat to have a new, fun experience, to fulfill curiosity about the world, to gain perspective on life, or for respite. I want this too, but I also want to participate in the equitable redistribution of resources, authentic and humble relationships with local people, a priority on connection over profit, and a sense that I am there to do both individual work and participate in collective liberation. If you are like me, when you engage in yoga travel, you want to take the opportunity to cultivate intimacy with yourself on the mat, but also with the uneven dynamics of race and religion that shape our experience and help us understand the world.

My hope for any immersion into a yoga practice—whether at your local studio or on retreat in Tulum—is for you to cultivate awareness and visionary strategy to tend to problems like the gender wage gap, the targeting of black folks by police departments, the separation of immigrant families, or the generations of assault on Turtle Island's indigenous peoples. By creating intimacy where there has been separation, we can humanize those who have been disregarded, displaced, or excluded. We can investigate what is deliberately hidden. Traveling ethically can be an opportunity to put our spirituality into practice in daily life.

See also [YJ Asked: How Can Teachers Make All Students Feel Included?](#)

## Questions to Ask Yourself Before You Host an International Yoga Retreat

These inquiries are not easy! But they can help you travel responsibly :

- What are my intentions in travel to this place, at this moment in my life, and at this moment in our political landscape?
- What can I learn about the local history, politics, spiritual and religious practices, and culture from the perspective of local communities? (If you don't have time to study this, perhaps it's not the right time to travel.)
- What does humility and integrity look like in the space I take up, or with the jewelry I wear, gifts I present, and products and experiences I consume?
- Who owns the retreat center? What is their position in the local culture, economy, and political landscape? What kind of income does the staff earn?
- What organizations in my travel destination can I donate to that serve local people at the margins?
- Can I offset the environmental impact of my flight through donating to an organization blocking an oil pipeline or supporting a reforestation project?

See also [What's the Difference Between Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Appreciation?](#)