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Unifying mind, body and cultures

Valpo yoga instructor studies in India with pioneer B.K.S. Iyengar

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VALPARAISO | Getting an all-you-can-eat meal for 70 cents was great, as was having to pay just \$12 for a month for a cook and a maid. Being treated like a celebrity wasn't bad, either.

But for Valparaiso yoga instructor Dana Darr, the best part of her recent five-week trip to India was that most of her time was spent studying under yoga pioneer B.K.S. Iyengar and his daughter, Geeta.

Darr teaches the Iyengar style of yoga -- which involves holding postures rather than power movements -- at her downtown Valparaiso studio, Asana Yoga Center. Darr said there is a seven-year waiting list to study at the Iyengar institute, but she got a chance after three years.

"It's a real privilege ... a huge opportunity," Darr said.

"Only 50 people go (each month). I was with people from Russia, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, Sweden, Canada and the U.S."

Darr said she's brought back a wealth of knowledge to her students, everything from how to use yoga to make a woman's legs thinner and more shapely or how to lessen or stop depression.

"I had done yoga for my depression for years, and it worked wonders, but the intensity of it there, it did more for me than 20 years of therapy and medication would ever do," Darr said.

"I don't know that I have (depression) any more."

Darr said Iyengar, although a diminutive 88-year-old man, has the presence of the Dalai Lama mixed with Santa Claus -- intimidating and delightful. He still does yoga eight hours a day and can do a back bend into a handstand.

"He's a wonder and absolutely ferocious at the same time," she said.

While in India, the students had two hours of yoga class each day, then were expected to practice the techniques for another three hours. They also were encouraged to attend medical classes for two or three hours each day.

"We were kept pretty busy and inevitably we did (yoga) in our free time," she said, adding the students learned a lot from each other.

When not busy with yoga, Darr enjoyed the largely vegetarian Indian cuisine, which features a lot of rice, bean, vegetable and bread dishes. She also took time to visit Buddhist caves carved into mountains and get fitted for a traditional Indian sari in turquoise and purple, which she plans to wear to an upcoming event.

She found the people in India to be very friendly to and curious about Americans. She would be ushered to the front of lines at restaurants and served by many people in stores. She felt like actress Angelina Jolie at one point.

"We would walk down the street and people would follow us," Darr said.

"They're just curious to see what your tastes might be, what you might say."

She saw liveliness and color everywhere -- women in beautiful saris and vendors pushing carts of vegetables and bread. She hopes to return again for a two-month study visit.

Print Page

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