

The Road to Rapture

Excerpt from the article "Road to Rapture" written by Elizabeth Gilbert, Ann Barros' Yoga in Bali July, 2002 tour participant.
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When everything in her life went haywire - her weight, her skin, her marriage - one woman turned to yoga and discovered beauty within herself. **By Elizabeth Gilbert**

The young woman at the jewelry shop can't believe how gorgeous I am. It's clear she's never met anyone quite as stunning as me. She stares at me in wonder and repeats over again, "You're so beautiful! You're so beautiful!"

We just met 17 minutes ago, when I wandered in off the street to look at the silver rings in her store. But this is the magical island of Bali, where people don't take very long to make friends and - here on the magical island of Bali - the way female friends greet each other is to exchange the most heartfelt compliments on each other's appearance.

"Look how beautiful you are!" she says again, smiling at the sheer miracle of my face.

"But you're beautiful," I correct her.

This is not merely polite; it's true. Simply put, she's Balinese. If you've ever seen Balinese women, that's all I need say on the topic. If you haven't, just shut your eyes and imagine someone who looks like a tropical waterfall and dresses like a lotus blossom.

She laughs. "But you are the most beautiful one!"

"No, you are!"

"No, you are!"

It's about ten o'clock in the morning. This could go on all day.

I'm starting to really love this country.

I've come to Bali for two weeks on a yoga vacation. This is a new trend in travel and surely a marvelous invention, seeing as how it combines two of my favorite pursuits - yoga and travel - in one package. (To me, this is something like getting your cake, eating it, and getting a pedicure at the same time.)

Truthfully, though, it isn't really the exotic travel I have come here for; it's the yoga. I am a devout believer in yoga. I know that every third woman in America these days is a devout believer in yoga and that there are already loads of stories floating around out there about *How Yoga Changed My Life*, but pull up a sticky mat, my friends, and settle back. Because this one is mine..(Here is described her woeful life: painful joints, poor complexion, weight gain, broken heart, sadness).

Yoga remained a great healer through a long transforming period of my life - keeping me breathing and focused even through the most disruptive, distorting, and painful moments of my divorce. But I'm not nearly done healing yet and I still have much to learn. And that's really why I've come to Bali for two weeks of intensive classes. To immerse myself in a practice that has helped me so much already. To see just how many more inches closer I can stretch toward peace, contentment, and true self-worth.

The administrative details of the trip proceed fairly simply. First, I get on an airplane and fly for about 20 hours. Then I stagger off the plane and meet my fellow yoga vacationers (ten of us in all; eight women and two men) and our instructor, Ann Barros. Ann is to be our guide, translator, yoga coach, and travel agent for the next two weeks - an extraordinary number of tasks, but she's perfectly suited for the job. Ann has spent the last 17 years living and traveling in Bali, which is only about ten years less than she has spent studying and teaching yoga. Her Bahasa Indonesian is as flawless as her posture. And the trip she's organized is as well-balanced and solid as a good triangle pose.

We spend the first few days in an exquisite hotel along the beach in Sanur, where I make a point of getting up early enough every morning to meditate while the sun busts up over the baby blue Indian Ocean. Then we spend the rest of the trip in an even more exquisite hotel in a mountain village called Ubud (where every day on our walks into town we must pass through an enchanting jungle temple complex called the Monkey Forest - filled with actual living monkeys! That you get to play with!). Ann's got us scheduled for two yoga classes a day as well optional afternoon trips around the island to see various jaw-droppingly stunning volcanoes and waterfalls and temples, etc.

And did I mention the actual living monkeys?

Everything in this trip is casual and easygoing, except the yoga. Which is not to say that Ann is a hard-ass, but she is a certified Iyengar instructor. Which is the yoga equivalent of being a Navy SEAL commander. For those accustomed to a faster-moving, more flowing style of yoga (or what one Iyengar snob I know refers to derisively as "YMCA yoga" or "Everybody-doing-it-wrong-and-getting-hurt-yoga"), Iyengar can seem strange or boring or even tyrannical at first. The focus on painstakingly achieving perfect alignment in each pose is so intense that I've been to two-hour classes where we studied only one posture for the entire class - the teacher refusing to move on until everyone's bones, joints, muscles and spines were set in exactly the right place.

It takes years and years of study to become a certified Iyengar yoga instructor, and the training these professional then offer us feels like something between a medical-school anatomy lesson and a master's ballet class - strenuous, intellectual and serious. You don't hear New Age music playing at Iyengar yoga studios, and the teachers aren't buff 22-year-olds named Amber. But if you stay with it, you will eventually lean and strengthen every inch of your body and can even correct your misalignments. Ann herself has corrected a nearly two-inch curvature of her spine with Iyengar's restorative techniques, and I have another teacher who miraculously straightened out her own bowleggedness. Just as miraculously, Iyengar has helped my butt look much, much nicer. (And, of course, rescued me from knee surgery. But you mostly see it in the butt.)

Ann is terrific - managing to somehow integrate all ten of us, with our different ages, sizes, and levels of study - into one cohesive unit. She says "I think of it like Balinese tapestry. You're all the different-colored threads and I'm just the weaver, trying to make a pattern out of all of you."

I disappear into the meditative pace of Ann's classes immediately. The setting, of course, is transporting enough - we practice in an airy pavilions with cool stone floors, perfumed tropical breezes, and birdsong as our only accompaniment to our breathing.

As I vanish into each posture, I think about the Yogic idea that each part of the body has a corresponding emotional connector, which is why you can sometimes heal your damaged psyche by working through the physical body. For instance, it is said that forward bends teach patience (because it takes so long for those hardworking hamstrings to let go) and that backbends teach courage (because it's so scary to expose our hearts to the world).

So I practice my patience and my courage on the cool stones of Bali...as Ann coaxes us all to move deeper into the poses, to imagine that we are warriors, that we are trees, that we have wings, that there is a wall behind us, that there are invisible hands lifting us....

We are a diligent bunch, the ten of us. We're Americans, which means we spend too much time at our jobs and that we worry too much and probably don't eat as well as we should. We've each come to Bali with our own stresses and troubles. There are deaths in our families, out-of-hand careers, fears that injure our bodies and our minds. (Paying particular interest to such things these days, I come to learn that - among the ten of us - there are seven divorces.) We've all come here to seek balance, and it's hard to imagine a better location than Bali in which to look for it.

Bali, of course, is a small tropical island in equatorial Indonesia, although that sentence hardly begins to do justice to the place. It's kind of like saying "Eden was a little garden in the Middle East." But Bali is more than paradise, it's the most Yogic culture on earth, a land of true serenity. (And I say that even though the nation was rocked by terrorist attacks shortly after my vacation there. The Balinese were able to hold their poise even during that unspeakable atrocity; responding afterward with calls for peace instead of demanding retribution against their Muslim neighbors. As a nation, they seemed to recognize somehow that violence and upheaval are also a part of life's balance.) The Balinese live their Hinduism deeply - there seem to be more shrines than private homes on the island - and their lifetime practices of prayer and ritual and celebration have clearly given them the strength to maintain serenity even when paradise is assaulted. Which is the highest aim of yoga - to hold your balance even when the world shakes under your feet.

The Balinese didn't invent the expression 'take it in stride', but they do have two popular phrases that govern their whole cultural ambiance. The first is 'maybe for sure', which is always used as a calming answer during distressing circumstances. For instance, if you frantically ask your Balinese taxi driver, "will we make it to the airport on time?" he will most likely smile and reply "Maybe for sure." If you ask again, he might change his answer to Bali's second most popular expression: "For sure maybe".

I start to use these Balinese phrases in my mind during particularly strenuous yoga classes, when I don't know if my body can take any more. Ann says "Can you hold that headstand for another two minutes?"

Maybe for sure, I think, and slowly give in to the challenges of the pose.

Or she'll ask, "Can you bring your thigh parallel to the floor during this warrior pose?"

For sure, maybe, I decide, and lo! - just as I'm relaxing into the pain, the perfect form comes upon me.

Something is happening to all the women in this group. We're turning into...girls. We're all starting to look and act more feminine. It just feels appropriate. Because everything here is gentle and lovely. Even the men wear saris of gold silk, and the policemen wear flowers behind their ears. Beauty is revered in Bali, but it's revered in America, too, so what's the difference? Here in Bali, beauty is organic and uncomplicated, unspoiled by petty jealousies, and uncorrupted by corporate-driven ideals. It's not an impossible standard of beauty that the Balinese seek, but just a beauty that they can live within and celebrate all the time., no matter what they may actually look like. Which is why it's hard to explain the concept of 'low self-esteem' to a Balinese woman. But why would a person possibly feel bad about herself? When the world is so beautiful? And when you are a part of it?

So it's not long before we American women relax into this welcoming world of beauty ourselves. We all start wearing saris and sandals instead of shorts and sneakers. The humid tropical climate is so nourishing that we all stop

using our moisturizer and makeup and just let the air take care of our skin. We spontaneously pick flowers off the ground along the beach path and weave them into our hair.

"This happens to me, too, whenever I come here," Ann tells us. "I become more feminine, more gentle, more pretty. Bali is a society where it's safe to be soft. And then I go back to America and all my defenses come right back."

But none of us wants to think about that right now. For now, we just want to drape ourselves in silk and lounge on our pool side verandahs, nibbling at slices of mango and listening to the birds sing.

"I fell like a raja princess", Sandy sighs, and Brenda replies, "I'm definitely having a goddess moment here."

As for me, I let me hair act all curly and wild and I start walking...swishingly. I buy bejeweled slippers and teensy little beaded purses. I wear tropical colors I've never imagined before. I buy a pair of silk pants that are such a bright and verdant shade of green that - as I walk through the jungle temple one morning - an actual live baby monkey accidentally mistakes me for foliage, latches onto my pants leg and makes a game little attempt to eat me.

I have become the Balinese landscape!

By the end of the trip, I'm so limber I can practically brush my teeth with my feet and so relaxed I could be the Buddha's therapist. Not only do I sleep more calmly at night than I have in years, but my dreams are actually coming back.. (We often lose our dreams as a result of depression and stress; a chilling metaphor if I've ever heard one.) During our final yoga class, I look around and see the improvements in everyone - Ken's shoulders are looser; Monique is braver with her back bends; Donna's triangle poses are positively elegant. We do chest-openers for the last half of the class and we all look terrific and strong, thrusting our hearts forward with such courage and dignity.

And, yes, everyone seems to have lost weight.

At dinner, Linda says. "Every day for the last ten days someone has told me how beautiful I am - what am I going to replace that with in Seattle?"

It's a question that's on everyone's mind, in some form. How can we bring this home with us? Obviously we won't be able to do four hours a day of yoga once we're back in our busy American lives, and there won't be cut flowers placed beside our beds every evening, and there won't be all this fresh fruit and all these butterflies and we probably won't dress in verdant green silks, but surely we can find something of this experience to bring home with us, right?

But what?

On the last free day of the trip, all the women in the group walk into town together and spend a whole day at a small house in a quiet rice paddy, getting traditional Balinese massages. We are taken away into separate incense-scented rooms, where lovely Balinese women remove our clothing, lay us down on soft sheets, take the pins and barrettes out of our hair, and massage our bodies with aromatic oils while the perfumed tropical breezes drift in and around us. We are given ginger tea to drink and papaya to eat. Then they rub healing spices into our skin (to cleanse our pores) and rinse us down with warm cream (to blow our minds).

Finally comes the ultimate luxury - they lead us by the hand to private baths filled with floating rose petals. And then these sweet Balinese angels silently sneak away and leave us - a motley crew of good-hearted and earnest and divorced and overworked modern American women - alone in our baths. And now we officially have nothing to do but contemplate what our bodies and souls and minds feel like after spending two weeks submerged in yoga and Bali and ritual and beauty and aromatic oils and roses.

I don't know what happens to the other women in their baths, but I, for one, start bawling my damn eyes out. Which doesn't feel so inappropriate at all, actually, even though I am experiencing the most transformatively blissful goddess moment of my life. I'm not crying out of sadness or confusion - not like all my other tears this year. I am crying out of release and understanding. I am crying out of compassion for myself and for these other American women whom I've come to love so much over the last two weeks. I'm crying for all the hard times we've ever had, for all the effort we've put forth into holding our ground in our barren modern culture, for all the mistakes we've ever made, for the hours we've ever struggled, but mostly for this: I am crying for all the hateful things we've ever said or thought about ourselves. How could we have ever treated ourselves so poorly? Why had we not been more sweet to ourselves?

And while I cry, this other voice inside me - my inner Balinese woman, maybe - is comforting me. She covers my body with roses and says with great peace, "It's OK. You just didn't know how beautiful you actually were. But now you understand, yes? Maybe? Maybe for sure?"