

STUDIO CITIES

Explore the practice through the eyes of the impassioned in **Paris**, **Tokyo**, **São Paulo**, and **Istanbul**.

by Andrea Ferretti

There's no doubt that the human experience of yoga is universal, and yet it's easy to forget that the practice reaches well beyond the confines of your neighborhood studio or even history-steeped India. If you were to close your eyes and put your finger on a map, in all likelihood you'd land on a city that has yoga studios, well-known teachers, and maybe even a big annual yoga conference. What does this mean for yoga? Is the practice drastically different in Tokyo and in Paris? How does each place embrace and assimilate the ancient spiritual practice within its culture?

The four yoga studio owners profiled here have put their passion, business savvy, and perseverance on full throttle to build yoga communities in their cities—sometimes from the ground up. We asked them to share their journeys and to describe the ripple effect yoga is having on their cities.

STUDIO Cihangir Yoga | STUDENTS PER MONTH 8,000

turkish insight

After opening a studio in 2001, Zeynep Aksoy swore she wouldn't do it again. The studio was successful and continues under different ownership, while her self-produced DVD sold more than 100,000 copies, but she suffered from burnout. She decided to return to her studies, becoming a student of European teacher Godfrey Devereux and delving into meditation in India. While studying with Devereux in Spain, she met her husband, David Cornwell, who convinced her to open another studio, Cihangir Yoga. (They have two business partners, teachers Zeynep Uras and Rebekka Haas Cetin.)

The second time around, Aksoy is focusing on living the philosophy that's been taught by her teachers. "I've found that the path is not about becoming something you're not; it's about becoming more of who you are," she says. "I'd call it being more selfish—not in a bad way, but I take care of myself." With Cihangir Yoga studios in two locations and an average of 2,000 students coming through each week, Aksoy's surrendered approach seems to be the secret to her success.

ON THE WITNESS Aksoy describes her personal philosophy and vision as the "pure

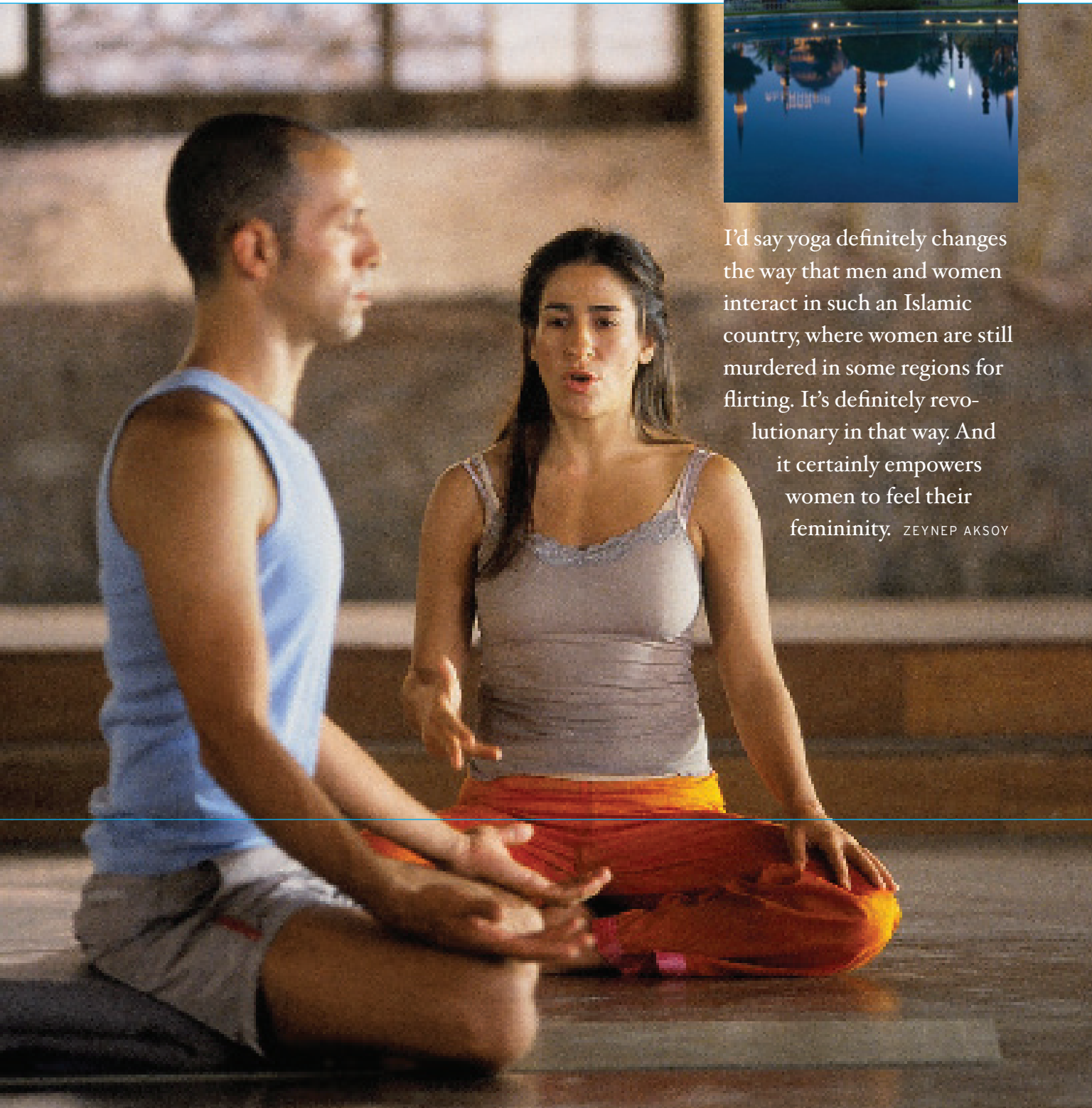
LEFT: DAVE & LES JACOBS/GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CUMHUR KAPLAN; GETTY IMAGES; DAVID CORNWELL





LOCATIONS **Two** in Istanbul, Turkey | POPULATION OF ISTANBUL **10 million**

I'd say yoga definitely changes the way that men and women interact in such an Islamic country, where women are still murdered in some regions for flirting. It's definitely revolutionary in that way. And it certainly empowers women to feel their femininity. ZEYNEP AKSOY



advaita message. We want the [students] to feel their body and to feel what's going on in the moment as it is. You release the effort and come into a space where you're only a witness, instead of struggling through life and blaming and feeling guilt."

ON THE CLIMATE OF YOGA When Aksoy opened her second studio in Istanbul, she dropped her prices, and the studio doubled its customers. "We changed the climate of yoga. It was an elite thing in Turkey, and [then] everyone started doing [yoga] once we made it accessible." With the motto "Yoga for Everyone," Cihangir offers different classes at a variety of prices, with the least expensive priced at around three dollars. "We really want to make sure that everyone—even the taxi driver—can do yoga in our studio," she says. "There's a lot of classism in Turkey that you don't get in America. We wanted to break that barrier."

ON A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH Aksoy describes a great schism in Turkey between citizens who want to maintain the separation between church and state and those who oppose such secularization. Both Cihangir studios are located in Westernized neighborhoods; most of the students who come are Westernized and are suspicious of any religious practice. Because of this, Aksoy says, they are "so not *bhakti*" (devotional). Her students favor a more scientific approach.

ON LIGHTNESS OF BEING "There's no alternative community in Turkey. In America, there are people who have alternative lifestyles. But in Turkey, it's all the same; it's homogenous—there's not really a big mix of races. And the atmosphere in Turkey is heavy. People smoke. There's a lot of pressure on women to sort of act like men so as not to call attention to themselves. You can't wear miniskirts on the street. But I notice that the students who have been with us for many years—they've stopped smoking. They smile more. It's like lifting a cloud off of people. We've brought lightness and potential happiness to people."





lighting up japan

I want to introduce many yoga styles to Japan. I hope to make every person a little happier, make Japan a little bit brighter, and make this world a more comfortable place. I want to continue doing this for the next 100 years. CHAMA MAMORU AIZAWA



ON INDEPENDENCE Mamoru Aizawa points out that, while the emphasis on maintaining harmony and hierarchy within yoga culture has its benefits, it also makes it difficult for people to think and act independently. He sees yoga as a powerful tool for taking people inward so that they can get to know themselves better. "I think Japanese people may not be as strong as individuals, but [they] are strong as a group. It's a positive trait with the national soccer team, but on the other hand, it can cause tragedies such as Aum Shinrikyo," he says. "I think yoga can help people who live in a group mentality to become stronger, to live by themselves, and to have peace within themselves."

ON THE TSUNAMI The day after the earthquake, Mamoru Aizawa opened the doors to his studio. He deliberated over

STUDIO **TokyoYoga** | STUDENTS PER MONTH **2,200** | LOCATIONS **Tokyo and Osaka, Japan** | POPULATION OF TOKYO **36 million**

Chama Mamoru Aizawa has always been ahead of his time. As an escape from his strict military high school in the early 1980s, Mamoru Aizawa took up surfing and spent hours each day meditating in silence. And eight years ago, he opened his first Ashtanga Yoga studio in Tokyo's neon-plastered shopping district of Shibuya. At the time, many people were wary of yoga. The country had been terrorized by the Aum Shinrikyo cult—a group that claimed yoga as part of its beliefs and was responsible for the sarin gas attack on Tokyo's subways in 1995. But Mamoru Aizawa believed in his mission to spread yoga in Japan.

Now, at age 45, he owns four successful yoga studios in Tokyo and Osaka. After the devastating earthquake and tsunami that rocked Japan's coast last March, Mamoru Aizawa used Twitter and Facebook to gauge interest in mobilizing yoga-inspired relief efforts. He's received both praise and criticism; some have labeled it a publicity stunt, but he is pressing on with his vision to bring yoga to victims in the affected areas.

ON REGGAE Mamoru Aizawa dreamed of being a musician. At 20 years old, he began running a club. He owned it for five years, and during his last two years at the club, he changed its focus to reggae music. He still feels that his management style is influenced by the peaceful, easygoing music genre.

the decision, knowing that aftershocks were still happening and train lines were still unstable, which could make it difficult for students to get home (and could ultimately make him responsible for their safety). His staff urged him to open, reminding him that this was the exact time when his students needed the studio the most.

After the opening chant, the studio owner recalls feeling a heaviness permeate the room. Instead of moving into their usual routine, the students stood still, some crying, some shaking. Mamoru Aizawa held the space, and after a while the students started naturally practicing together. Afterward, the students shared how grateful they were for being able to practice together that day.

ON HEALING In October of 2011, Mamoru Aizawa took a group of volunteers to Kesennuma, a town in the northeast of Japan that was hit hard by the tsunami. Forty-five yoga students and teachers offered a weekend of classes, bodywork, food, and live music to 700 people who were living in temporary housing. The initial reception was lukewarm—especially among the younger residents of the town.

But Mamoru Aizawa's drive is undeterred. He hopes to have two large events per year and to send small groups of volunteers to the area regularly throughout the year. Eventually, he wants to open a retreat center in the area. A true Ashtangi, Mamoru Aizawa believes that consistency and regular yoga practice are key to the experience of healing.



STUDIO **Aruna Yoga** | STUDENTS PER MONTH **800** | LOCATION **São Paulo, Brazil** | POPULATION OF SÃO PAULO **19 million**

brazilian spirit I've been teaching for almost 30 years, and I've collected stories from people who have really changed the way they live just because of something I said in class or from practicing yoga. This is very important to me. **ANDERSON ALLEGRO**

Anderson Allegro found his calling at a young age. After reading about yoga in a book when he was 10 years old, Allegro started entertaining his family by leading yoga classes in the living room. At 18, he found his first yoga teacher, and by the tender age of 20, he began teaching classes out of the garage at his family's home. His studio in São Paulo is now nearly two decades old, and it offers a variety of different styles of yoga, teacher training programs, and rousing nights of kirtan (devotional chanting) in the studio's 3,000-square-foot space.

ON BEING A YOUNG, MALE, CATHOLIC YOGI

"It was a revolution in my house because my family was very Catholic, and they didn't understand what was happening to me. But yoga made me change my point of view and the way I was behaving. At first, my family was a little worried; but after some time, they saw that it was good for me, and they agreed with my yoga practice. Now they all practice yoga, and some of them work with me at my yoga school."

ON BEING SPIRITUAL, NOT RELIGIOUS "Most of my students enjoy hearing about the spiritual part of yoga. Once, a student came to me and said, 'I don't want to do mantras because I'm Catholic.' And I said, 'That's OK; you don't need to. No problem at all.' So they know that we're not

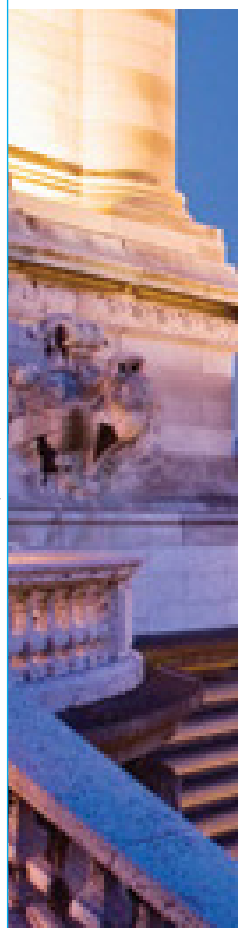


pushing them into another religion. They can decide what's good for them."

Last year, Allegro brought one of his gurus from the Bihar School of Yoga in India to give a talk at his studio. He was surprised by the enthusiastic participation of his students. "More than 100 people took initiation with her, which was a surprise for me. I was expecting 20 to 30 people, but 130 people! I think Brazilian people are becoming very open to this spiritual part of yoga. This is what I want to teach more. It's not a religious approach, but we cannot deny this spiritual part of yoga."

ON HAVING FUN Even though the practice is sacred and dear to him, Allegro lightens things up from time to time with a wisecrack or a practical joke. Last Christmas, he put a Santa Claus hat on the studio's statue of the elephant-headed Hindu deity, Ganesha.

FROM TOP: COURTESY ANDERSON ALLEGRO; JEREMY WOODHOUSE/GETTY IMAGES



french connection



Sometimes I'll sit in the entryway and I'll see people coming and going, and I'll think, "Wow, I created this place. And it's such an important part of people's lives." It's an important place for them to express and de-stress and connect with the most profound things in their lives. And it's amazing to see. **DANIELA SCHMID**

"At other studios, you had wonderful teachers and classes. And you'd come out of this amazing class in complete bliss, and you'd be thrown onto the street," says Schmid. "It was too abrupt."

ON CITY LIVING In a city where living space is small, the Metro is crowded, and expectations for excellence abound, Schmid

is thrilled to see students go from being aggressive and rushed as they sign in for class to being relaxed and centered as they leave. "I think, 'Good, good. Take it with you outside. Keep it there.'"

ON GIVING BACK The practice of *seva*, or selfless service, is important to Schmid. Through a partnership with a charity called Trees for the Future, money from each purchase at the studio—whether it's a class card, a T-shirt, or juice—goes toward tree-planting projects. According to Schmid, Rasa also supports 250 children in an orphanage in India who have opted to take yoga twice weekly. "They get their outfits and their mats, and they get to travel to competitions and live for a few days outside of their world," she says. "I think it's such a wonderful project. I just love it." ❖

As a 16-year-old living in Frankfurt, Germany, Daniela Schmid had never heard of yoga. But when a worldly cousin left behind B.K.S. Iyengar's seminal book, *Light on Yoga*, Schmid was intrigued. "That book became my little treasure," says the owner of Rasa Yoga Rive Gauche. She remembers painstakingly practicing along with it and being introduced to the micromovements of the system—reading several paragraphs, then moving her big toe, then reading some more, and rotating her thigh. After years of studying yoga and working as an architect, Schmid opened her Paris studio in 2005. Seven years later, the studio is thriving, and Schmid is enjoying the ride.

ON DIVERSITY According to Schmid, yoga is still relatively young in Paris. (She remembers getting phone calls from people just a

few years ago asking, "Are you a religious sect?"). Before she opened Rasa, there were Iyengar and Ashtanga Yoga studios in Paris, but few of them took an ecumenical approach. Schmid offers more than 10 different styles of classes, from hatha flow to Iyengar to prenatal yoga, so that students of all ages and interests can find something appealing, even as they change and evolve.

ON BEAUTY With her background in architecture, crafting a beautiful, serene space was of paramount importance to Schmid. At Rasa, the reception area is as big as the light-filled studio. She wanted the reception space to provide students with an opportunity to chat, have tea, and connect with each other as well as giving them an area to transition from the bustling streets of the Left Bank to a calm, quiet space.

FROM TOP: ERHARD SUESS; MASSIMO BORCHI/CORBIS

STUDIO **Rasa Yoga Rive Gauche** | STUDENTS PER MONTH **3,000** | LOCATION **Paris, France** | POPULATION OF PARIS **10 million**

