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Kripalu updates its look but not its values

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For most of its history, "chic" was not a word that applied to Kripalu. Perched atop a hill in the Berkshires, it was exactly what one might expect from a nonprofit yoga retreat center - circa 1970.

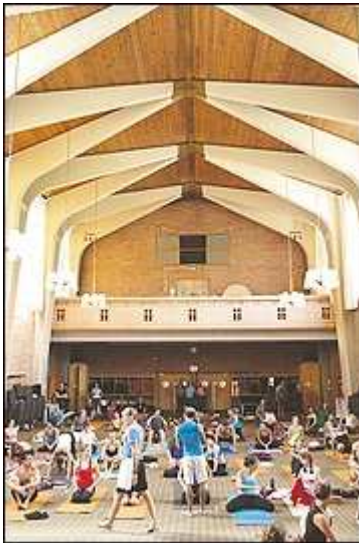


Housed in a monolithic brick building that once was a Jesuit seminary, it offered accommodations in minimalist dormitories, some with bunk beds, and all with shared bathrooms reminiscent of a high-school locker room. (Tampons: 25 cents!) The food was basic and vegetarian, served cafeteria-style, and caffeine was forbidden. Most of the guests fit the yoga stereotype: middle-aged women in schlubby sweats dedicated to drinking tea and finding themselves.

But over the past decade, yoga has changed. Teachers are now rock stars with their own lines of clothing and DVDs. The practitioners are young: 40.6 percent are between the ages of 18 and 34, according to a 2008 poll commissioned by Yoga Journal. And they're affluent. They buy \$100 Manduka mats and favor outfits from Lululemon, a Canadian yoga "lifestyle" company that specializes in \$98 "groove" pants. And when it comes to retreating from the world, many, including me, prefer a little luxury - at the very least, a bathroom of one's own.

These trends, plus the need to house a growing number of students, led Kripalu to unveil a \$15.3 million eco-friendly Annex last fall. Compared with the old main building, the LEED-certified addition, made of concrete and wood reclaimed from houses destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, looks like a beautiful alien spaceship hovering above a canopy of green. But inside are 80 minimalist rooms, each with locally made furniture, hypoallergenic mattresses and, most important, a private bath. Could Kripalu evolve without losing its soul? I had come to find out.

Kripalu is not only a place but a style of yoga that emphasizes meditation and breathing and encourages inward focus and spiritual attunement. In other words, it's the antithesis of the power yoga that has helped spur yoga's growth in recent years.



The first Kripalu ashram, a residential yoga center, was founded in Sumneystown, Pa., by Yogi Amrit Desai in 1972. Named for Desai's guru, Swami Kripalu, a master of a style of yoga called kundalini, the ashram grew quickly. In 1983, Kripalu purchased the old Jesuit seminary in Stockbridge, Mass. By 1989, the number of full-time residents, who took vows of celibacy, obedience and simplicity, grew to more than 350. More than 10,000 guests visited for yoga programs.

In 1994, Desai was accused of sexual misconduct and abuse of power. The ashram was shut down under a cloud of scandal. But Kripalu continued to welcome visitors, and in 1999, it formally changed its status from a religious organization to a secular nonprofit. Its mission: to teach the art and science of yoga.



I have practiced vinyasa yoga, which emphasizes movement and flow, regularly for 10 years. Like Kripalu, I strongly reject the yoga-for-exercise ethos. For me, it has always been a spiritual as well as a physical practice. But I do admit to liking - and owning - a small collection of Lululemon tops, flare pants and a brand-name mat (not Manduka). Upon my arrival at Kripalu, I was immediately relieved to be staying in the Annex.

It was a sticky, gray summer day. Inside the main building, the air was heavy with a stale sweat. Over at the Annex, which is connected by a ground-floor glass passage, the concrete floors and glass walls kept the air clean and pleasantly chilled, though there is no air conditioning.

My room, which I shared with my friend Megan, might be described as "modern monastic." It was small and white, with one cheerful flowered throw pillow on each bed. There was no art on the walls, no TV and no closet, just a small rod with a few hangers in the entryway and a drawer under each single bed. But there was wireless Internet access, available at no extra charge.

And, of course, there was a bathroom! It looked as if it had been lifted wholesale from an Ikea showroom, but no matter. It was ours: small but sleek with a deep bathtub and an oversize shower head. A glass wall separated it from the sleeping area, a decision designed to create a sense of openness, according to Kripalu literature, but one that caused initial consternation for two friends sharing a room - until we discovered that we could draw a curtain for privacy.

I would have been very happy passing my two days at the Annex. But no matter where you sleep, most activities take place in the main building. On our first morning, we rose early for the 6:30 "moderate" yoga class. The room was stuffy and the motel carpet reeked of sweat. The class could only be honestly called moderate if the target audience was octogenarian. For most of the 75-minute class, we performed gentle stretches and twists - and I spent most of the time trying to avoid touching the carpet. The lunchtime "vigorous vinyasa" class was almost as slow, and the teacher advised us

to "take it at our own pace" at least six times. If this was Kripalu holding on to its history, I wasn't sure I wanted it to.

Happily, our experiences improved over the course of our stay. We were inspired by a workshop on the five Tibetan rites of rejuvenation, a kind of 10-minute mini yoga practice that involves spinning, leg lifts, kneeling back bends, hip stretches and core work in the form of a slow roll between the famous downward-facing and upward-facing dog poses. (According to our teacher, the series was developed by a guru who visited a monastery in Tibet where monks were falling asleep during their meditations.) When the sun came out, ushering in a glorious only-in-New England summer day, we joined a two-hour guided hike through the woods and fields of golden yarrow and Queen Anne's lace.



Among the most pleasant surprises was the food. Kripalu's self-serve lines look like those in a college cafeteria. But what could have been tasteless vegan soups and tofu stews were uniformly delicious and filling in the hands of Kripalu's executive chef, Deb Morgan. I went back for seconds for both the romaine lettuce salad tossed with miso dressing, peanuts and cilantro and the spicy carrot ginger soup.

Classes, room and board are all included in Kripalu's price. Coffee, however, is not. It is available for sale at the center's snack bar. The coffee bar, along with fish or chicken at dinner four times per week, was added about six years ago, says Cathy Husid-Shamir, Kripalu's director of media relations. The decision, like the one to build the Annex, was a response to guests' demands. "You'd go into town and you'd see all these Kripalu people at the coffee shop, so we knew that people wanted it," she said. "But it also raised a whole conversation about how we can be kind to our guests: Is it kind to have people getting headaches from caffeine withdrawal? We try not to pass judgment."

Kripalu's acceptance of yogis' preference for meat, caffeine, wireless Internet access and upscale accommodations will help attract a new set of students. The expansive options at its Healing Arts Center are a draw, too. Like the rest of the building, the spa

doesn't look like much: The rooms have the same cinder-block walls and motel carpeting; the only difference is the piped-in yoga music. But the range of treatments and the expertise of the practitioners, many of whom train at Kripalu's college of ayurveda, are probably unmatched in the area. I signed on for massage to treat an aching hip. My therapist consulted for 10 minutes about which yoga poses helped and which aggravated the situation before delivering a sensitive and truly therapeutic rub.



Still, the place where we found Kripalu's values of unconditional acceptance most in evidence was at a class called Yoga Dance. Under the soaring ceilings of the former chapel, about 60 of us, on hands and knees, slowly rotated our hips to the chords of a New Age instrumental track. Some made small, conservative movements. But others arched their spines, then swooshed their hips to their heels like aspiring pole dancers - and they were setting the tone.

Within minutes, our teacher had us on our feet. We shimmied. We marched. We mimicked the movements of anyone in the room who inspired us (or whom we were capable of mimicking). At the peak of the hour-long class, we expressed our fears and anxieties to our inner shamans, then granted ourselves healing. Really.

It wasn't yoga, per se. But in the final cool-down, a bearded man wearing a "Go Bruins" T-shirt rocked an imaginary dance partner in his arms. On a raised platform, the former church altar, a guy who looked like he might coach a Little League team in his real life twirled a leopard-print scarf in graceful circles like a Chinese ribbon dancer. Every person in the room was present, joyful and, perhaps as a result of exhaustion, utterly unselfconscious. And whether you demand coffee, meat or your very own bathroom, isn't that what yoga is all about?