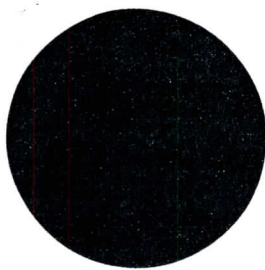


IS HIKING + YOGA THE ULTIMATE
PATH TO REJUVENATION?

NIRVANA NOW!

by Steve Friedman

OUR MAN TAKES HIS BAD BACK
AND TROUBLED SOUL TO YOSEMITE
TO FIND OUT. illustrations by Morgan Schweitzer



A healthy, optimistic hiker should look forward to a guided backpacking trip in Yosemite National Park, with daily yoga sessions, as cause for great delight and anticipation.

My story is a little more complicated.

First off, my lower back has been giving me trouble since the afternoon I wrenched it as I lay in bed and reached for an apple

fritter without taking my eyes off *Starship Troopers*, which I like to watch once a month. Second, traveling makes me nervous. Third, the mood elevators I have been gobbling for the past couple of years exacerbated my inclination toward what an ex called “lazy walrusishness,” which forced me to compensate by drinking

buckets of coffee, which worsened my acid reflux, which compelled me to up my intake of ice cream and pie (for their calming effects), which prompted my doctor—a tiny woman with an infectious smile—to poke me in my gut and shake her head sadly, and then promise she wouldn't nag me for a couple of months if I promised to supplement my “alarming” donut habit with the occasional orange or salad. But “the clock is ticking,” she said. All of that made me want to take a long nap.

Merely the idea of planning and packing for a backcountry trek made me exhausted. The notion of sitting in a lotus position made my knees hurt. The prospect of chatting with strangers kicked up what my shrink calls “generalized anxiety disorder.”

And yet.

By combining a guided backpacking trip in the Yosemite high country with regular yoga sessions, California-based Balanced Rock's catalog promised to “rejuvenate, restore, and return to balance.” Also, it said that participants would travel “into new undiscovered places, both inside and outside of ourselves.” Much as I try to avoid new places, some of my old places were losing their charm. The pizza delivery guy in my neighborhood calls me “Steverino,” and my accountant recently mentioned that he was “officially worried.” My shrink has been ordering me to seek my “authentic self.” Also, the toilet in my New York City studio apartment makes strange sounds at night. So undiscovered places sounded okay. They sounded almost perfect—my wariness about stretch pants, strange languages, and chanting notwithstanding.



THE FIRST YOGA SESSION took place in Yosemite's Tuolumne Meadows, at dusk in mid-July. We were camping near the trailhead the night before the four-day trek started. There were 15 of us, ranging in age from 29 to 61, with 12 women and two men besides me. Everyone practiced yoga with some seriousness—except me (I had

“COMBINING A FOUR-DAY BACKPACKING TRIP WITH DAILY YOGA SESSIONS APPEALED TO MY SHORTCUT-TO-SERENITY SENSIBILITIES.”



tried for a month, a few years earlier).

We sat in a circle underneath pink and sherbet-colored clouds. One of the trek leaders, Heather Sullivan, 38, suggested that we relax and become aware of our surroundings. So I became aware of the mountain hemlock and lodgepole pine-scented air, the mule deer gazing at us from a quarter mile away, the burbling streams nearby. Heather suggested that we were here to “unplug, unwind, and slow down,” and I became aware that Heather was slim and beautiful and that if I looked hard, I could see calm and joy in her soft and wise hazel eyes. I also became aware of my authentic self. Authentic Steve thought this return to balance thing might not turn out so bad.

Heather suggested we get comfortable and take off our shoes so that we might feel more at one with the earth. After I did so, I became aware that the grass up here at 8,600 feet was spiky and it hurt and that there were ants crawling on my feet. As I became aware of those things, Briann Powell Roberts, 32, co-leader of the group, told us that “the high country is so special. I’m into teaching you how to take care of your body.” At about that moment I became aware that Briann was also quite fetching. The support staffer for the trip was a slim, handsome man named Jon-Paul Salonen, 33, who could do splits and run up mountains and who said, after he told us to call him “J.P.,” that “I’m your *Hanuman*. My *Seva* is to help you.” Authentic Steve became aware that he had some trust issues with J.P.

Heather told us to breathe deeply. She told us to put our hands on the ground in front of us and our heels on the ground behind us and to stick our butts in the air. Everyone but me knew this was called Downward Facing Dog. She told us to breathe deeply some more. She told us to put one foot on the opposite calf. After 30 minutes of breathing deeply and bending and stretching, she told us that we would then practice *Savasana*, which I think means inner visualization or prayer or coma, because I peeked at everyone while we all laid on our backs, and they looked very serious, with their eyes closed. I became aware that my back, remarkably, already felt a little better. But I also wondered how a night spent on a sleeping pad would affect it.

On the walk back to dinner, I sidled up alongside Heather and made backcountry/yoga conversation. Would there be bears? Did she have any special yogic suggestions for a guy with a bad back? How cold would it be at the lake to which we were hiking? Did she grow up around here? Does she like movies?

Heather paused, gazed deep into my eyes, and patted my arm. She told me that I should try to relax, that “the air up here is good for *Pranayama*,” which I’m pretty sure means “healthy bowel movements,” which I had been having some trouble with the past few years. I suspected it was exacerbating my back pain.



I WORRIED THAT MY LOVE FOR HEATHER and my digestive issues might repel the group. That’s why, following a feast of pasta, salad, roasted vegetables, and salmon, prepared by Heather, Briann, and J.P. at the Tuolumne campground, I remained silent during the



why-we-came-here session.

Klara, a neuropsychologist from New York City, told us she loved yoga and was here to celebrate her birthday. Klara's best friend, Yodi, visiting from Hungary, said something that sounded like "me no English, very very tired." (Her name might have been Ogi; her accent threw me.)

Sarah, a hair stylist from Chicago, shared, "I turned 30 and I wanted to slow down and find myself."

Petrina, a college counselor from San Francisco, mumbled something that sounded like "fresh air," but I wasn't sure. I was concentrating on grabbing a second serving of pasta.

There were two women from Ogden, Utah, Nikki and Angela, who were here because they wanted to get away and it sounded like fun. San Franciscans Jeff and Jennifer, who looked like they could have been J. Crew models or Olympic athletes, were here because they wanted to de-stress from their jobs (Jeff works in advertising; Jennifer is a litigator). Jennifer said, "I expected to reconnect with nature and reconnect with myself."

Such earnest simplicity. What convincing lie could I come up with? I had tried meditation, medication, daily exercise, and regular bedtime. None had lasted. Being a New Yorker, I preferred faster, less labor-intensive solutions. What's more, even the backpacking trips I did manage to take were too short to afford the deep relaxation—the what-day-is-it-anyway detachment—that a week or more on the trail delivers. That's why combining a four-day backpacking trip with daily yoga sessions appealed to my shortcut-to-serenity sensibilities. When I had tried yoga, I couldn't deny its benefits, even if I couldn't make it regularly to class. I had backpacked most of my adult life and liked that, too. I derived what seemed like a richer perspective on the universe and a feeling of calm from each, but after a few days back in the city, the mellowness curdled. Would combining the two activities supercharge my soul, delivering the zen state more quickly and making it last longer? If I was unwilling or unable to adopt the lifestyle changes that seem to be in vogue among health professionals and spiritual leaders, might at least Authentic Steve chill out, and stay chilled out?

More to the point, might a few nights away from Netflix, Caribbean Coconut ice cream with hot fudge sauce, and my shoebox-size Manhattan apartment, where my toilet makes wounded yeti

sounds approximately 14 times an hour, help me? How could I package all that in a way that wouldn't make me a pariah?

"Steve? Steve?"

It was Heather. I respected Heather, but I wasn't sure she was ready to hear the reasons I had come here.

"I'm a seeker," I said. That sounded authentic. Was it my imagination, or was the group staring at me with suspicion? I felt my stress levels spiking. Why were they judging me? "I seek! I seek balance!"

In the morning, after a night in Tuolomne Meadows, where—except for the fact that the Ogden gals left an apple core in the fire pit next to my tent (why didn't they just slather my tent stakes with honey?) and the fact that I woke up gasping for oxygen at 2 a.m., and the fact that my back throbbed—I slept well, we gathered to pack for our 6-mile, 2,100-foot climb to Young Lake.

Heather laid out the group gear that we all would carry—bear canisters filled with food, cooking utensils, tents, and the like—and said, "I don't want anyone to worry. We'll manage everything. We're not here to suffer. If something hurts, let us know."

Then she warned us that our packs might feel uncomfortable at first, but that we would hopefully reach "pack nirvana." She showed us how to distribute items and assured us that even if our packs



seemed full, we'd manage to get everything in. "Our motto here is 'it will fit.'"

I come from a family whose packing mottos are "Mine is already loaded!" and "You're bigger than me!" and "I've had a hard year!" and "You want to eat raspberry-filled chocolate bars, then you carry the raspberry-filled chocolate bars, Piggy!" and "Will you stop your whining and just man the f#*& up?!"

We packed. We hit the trail.

As I sought pack nirvana, I gasped and sweated a lot. I thought—and Authentic Steve agreed—that this seemed like a particularly brutal climb, considering we were supposed to be relaxing and not suffering.

The brochure suggested that today would be dedicated to "talking about self-care along the way and soaking up the incredible scenery," and while there was incredible scenery (endless alpine meadows, looming peaks, wildflowers) and while there was conversation among the group about how happy everyone was to be away from computers and deadlines and how peaceful it was to do yoga outdoors with mule deer watching, and while my back did seem looser, and while Heather did suggest ways we could relax, even in our non-wilderness lives, with yoga and meditation, I was still struggling. So I reverted to my usual mantra when hiking up steep trails with a heavy pack or otherwise encountering life's difficulties (one which my shrink has suggested I cease and desist).

"F#*&," I said. "F#*&. F#*&. F#*&."

Authentic Steve didn't mind his screaming muscles and burning lungs, because Authentic Steve knew that exercise was good for him. Also, he knew about the studies that showed that social interaction improves mental health, and that experiencing wilderness lowers the heart rate and increases one's sense of well-being, and that yoga has been shown to help with ailments ranging from anxiety to arthritis. Heather reminded us of these things, and she encouraged us throughout the trip to focus on the moment, to open ourselves to the beauty surrounding us, to practice yoga with attention and free from competition, to embrace all that the universe offered.

Authentic Steve loved all that stuff. I, on the other hand, bitched and moaned a little bit.

My fellow Yoga and Wellness Trekkers apparently noticed.

"Dude," Ogden Angela had said at breakfast, after I had pointed out to her that she had endangered my life by leaving the apple core in the fire pit. "You need to really concentrate on the yoga. Either that, or take a chill pill." (When I asked if it was okay for Mormons to have tattoos, as she and Nikki did, they both merely stared at me. It turned out Angela isn't Mormon.)

"You seem unbalanced," had suggested Stephanie from Berkeley, who "practices healing arts," when I pulled into the campsite, then took my backpacking stool out of my rental car, then put it back in, then took it back out, then put it back in. (I've been conflicted about my camper's stool ever since the day, a decade earlier, that I first took it into the mountains. Yes, my compatriots had laughed at it then, and mocked it, then envied it, then told me I was a selfish sloth. My three-legged camping stool and I share a complicated relationship and I have discussed it at length with my shrink. She suggests I need to let the stool go. She suggests a lot of things.)

After six hours, we arrived at Young Lake at 10,000 feet, a shimmering jewel surrounded by woods and meadows.

I watched the Balanced Rock brain trust gather and look at us panting and gasping and setting up our tents. They announced we would skip yoga that evening. Just as well, as our group was soon preoccupied with an anxiety you won't find in many yoga studios.

A scream rent the air.

"Jeff! Jeff!"



It was Jennifer, of the San Francisco couple. It was twilight, and she had been in the woods, dealing with some digestive issues of her own, when a large bear had approached. Jennifer's experience seemed to shake the group, and in spite of promises from Heather and crew that we were safe and that the bear wouldn't hurt anybody, and some exhortations to be aware of the natural beauty, a lot of the yoga and trekking spiritual ease seemed to have dissipated. The brochure had promised that evenings "may include...fireside stories, music, or gazing at the Milky Way," but none of that was happening. What was happening was a lot of nervous talk about bears. Authentic Steve decided that it would be within the letter of the group mission to tell some fireside stories of his own.

So after dinner and shortly after dark, I snuck up on

Hurry Up and Relax!

Proven paths to better backcountry R&R

Learn Yoga

Not only does yoga help relieve stress and boost mental rejuvenation, it's particularly good for backpackers because it reduces tension in your back, legs, neck, and upper body, and the deep breathing helps you prep for restful sleep. Good poses for hikers: Downward Facing Dog, Warrior 1 and 2, Pigeon, Crescent Moon, and Tree. Find instructions at yogajournal.com

Try Walking Meditation

Research suggests meditation has positive effects on blood pressure, cortisol levels, and other markers of stress reduction. Good news: You can hike (no pack, easy trail!) and meditate at the same time. Slow down and focus on your body, on the sensation in your feet, on the rocks, roots, and earth. Consider counting your steps to keep your mind from wan-

dering. (Start with 1, then 1, 2, then 1, 2, 3, and so on, up to 10, then start over. If you lose count, start again.)

Prepare for a Relaxing Trip

Picture this all-too-common scenario: You had to stay late at work, which made you pack in a hurry, and now you're rushing to the trailhead, anxious that you forgot something critical and already stressing about a to-do list that awaits your return. Who can relax on a trek like that? Put your trip on the calendar at work and make sure everyone knows you'll be out of contact; enlist a colleague who can manage unexpected issues while you're away; and use a checklist (backpacker.com/checklists) while packing.

Hike to a Hot Spring

Soaking in hot springs lowers levels of the stress hormone cortisol, thus reducing inflammation and built-up strain in your ligaments and joints. Find perfect backcountry soakers at backpacker.com/hotsprings.



the Ogden tent and made growling bear noises and Angela and Nikki screamed, and after that I told them tales of "The Weeping Man of The Sierras" and "The Liverless Grandmother of Young Lake" and a few other classics.

Research shows that yoga can ameliorate depression, as well as help people deal with pain. I also tend to believe that a good ghost story, delivered 6 miles from civilization, can help people deal with deep-seated fears, bring a group closer together, and serve as a way of facing archetypal demons. So I didn't take it personally when Petrina yelled from the next tent, "Shut the hell up. You're freaking me out!"

I took a few deep breaths, or *Pranayama*, which I now knew did not mean "bowel movement," but "good breathing." I slept well that night, and my back didn't hurt, and except for some nightmares about slaving bears with red eyes doing Downward Facing Dog, I woke up refreshed.



AT BREAKFAST, J.P. told us that we should "honor our cravings." I took my third muffin and became aware that Authentic Steve thought J.P. was not such a bad guy.

We hiked through lupine and mountain aster and Indian paintbrush. We did yoga in a field where I commanded my toes to make friends with the earth. As we moved from one

pose to another, some of us more gracefully than others, I realized that I was enjoying myself. I realized that I was not feeling anxious—about anything. Or was it Authentic Steve realizing that stuff? I was having a hard time telling us apart.

Afterward, we lounged next to another mountain lake. I basked on a big rock with some of my fellow Trekkers. I listened to their concerns. The Ogden gals were worrying about their 12-hour drive and the hairdresser was freaking out about some difficult clients. I suggested they stay in the moment, and I actually believed it.

The moment was good. Many moments of the trip were good. There were moments of pack nirvana and "The Backbreaker of Mariposa County" (another classic) and the three-legged hiking stool. The moments were better because Heather, Briann, and J.P. made all the meals and did almost all the cleaning. There was one not-so-good moment on our last night at Young Lake, when I volunteered to fetch some water from the lake a quarter mile from our campsite, then got lost and thrashed around for 20 minutes before stumbling, breathless, back to camp, waterless, and saw something that looked like disappointment, maybe contempt, in Heather's eyes. Authentic Steve hoped he was mistaken.

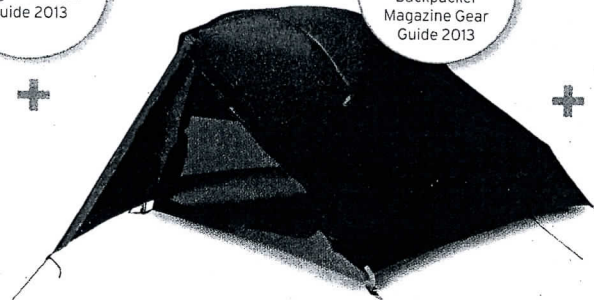
On our hike out, during our final yoga session in another alpine meadow, Heather glanced my way. (It might have been because I was grunting a little.) I wondered how she would feel about bearing my children and raising them in the ways of the

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mountains and *Pranayama*. We did Downward Facing Dog and the foot-on-the-opposite-leg pose and another one called Warrior Pose. I still craved some Caribbean Coconut ice cream. I still could not forget the cranky toilet awaiting me in New York City. And yet. My back seemed to be healed. My mind—or soul, or spirit—also seemed to be doing better. I wasn't worrying about my ex or my income or deadlines. I wasn't worrying much at all. I decided that yoga and backpacking went together well. Both inspire focus on the moment—the step up the mountain, the pose in the meadow, the breathing.

"Anyone who wants to can simply practice *Savasana*," Heather said.

Before this trip, I would have begun a fake diaphragm-breathing, wrist-waving motion that I think covers all the positions, or otherwise tried to hide my ignorance, or just gone straight coma, but this time—I am trying to be more in touch with my authentic self, after all—I asked, "What is *Savasana*?" Heather looked at me with a deep and enduring mountain type of love. Or it might have been pity.

"*Savasana* is the rest position, Steve."

For the next 10 minutes, I carefully and conscientiously Savasitized.

During our final march to civilization, Heather gathered us and cautioned us that as we neared the completion of a journey—no matter how wondrous and transformative the trip might have been—we humans are tempted to focus on what is at the end of the journey: work, family, things waiting for us. Please, she implored, take a minute to enjoy the present moment. This is the moment we all have.

Authentic Steve was there, he really was, but he's human. We can't escape our past. Some of my other family backpacking mottos are "Where are we stopping for dinner?" and "I get first shower" and "You didn't leave that candy bar on the front seat, did you?"

But the trip had worked. Whether it was the fresh air or the mountain lakes or the *Savasana*—which both Authentic Steve and I could use some more of—I realized that my concerns about the angry New York toilet and the Caribbean Coconut ice cream were not real, but mere phantasms. None of my anxieties were real. The mountains were real, the peace I felt in Downward Facing Dog, my healed back, the snowy peaks around us, the hot Ogdenites' cool tattoos, Jeff and Jennifer's good cheer, Heather's enduring love for me and our future in the mountain yurt together and...

"Yo, Steve, have you noticed that the group is moving? How about shuffling your lazy *Savasana*-loving ass?" It was Petrina, from San Francisco.

On the way out, I inquired about Petrina's childhood. I asked about nightlife in Ogden. I even chatted with Yodi/Ogi, or tried to chat with her, anyway. I pointed at Heather, and put my hand on my chest and fluttered it. "Good!" I said. "I mean, 'Gut!' Heather and me. True love-ski! Gut!" Yodi/Ogi (whose real name, it turned out, is Gyorgyi) scuttled away from me.

At our last break, Heather suggested we take the next 15

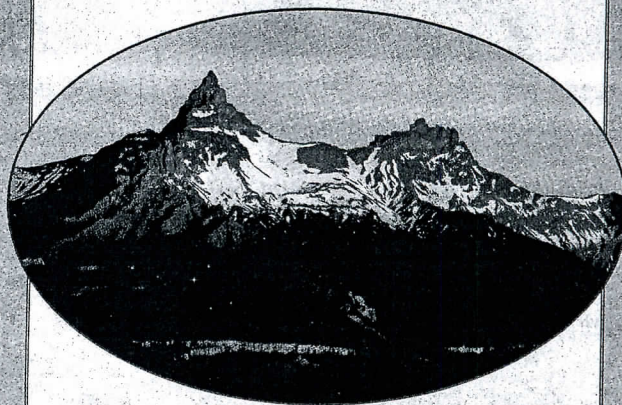
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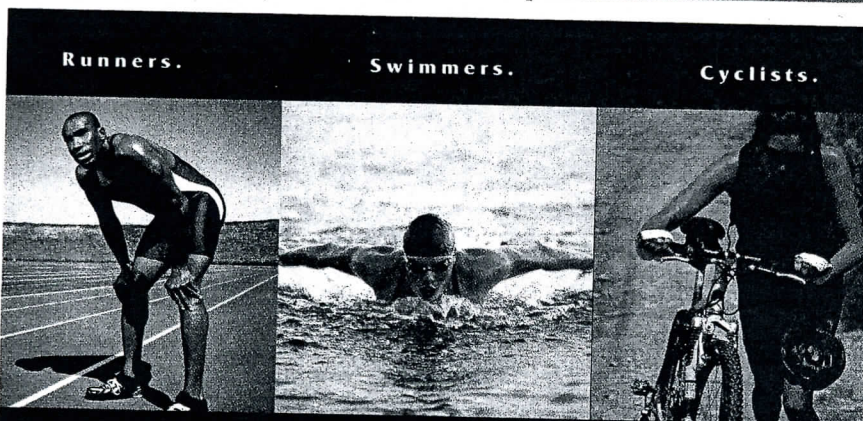
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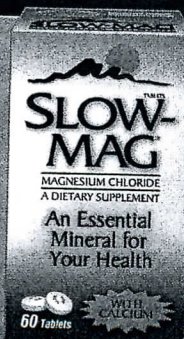


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minutes of our hike to be quiet (the Ogden gals had been planning an awesome beer blast, and Stephanie the Healer had been explaining to the hairdresser something about creative visualization) and to “think of something we want to let go of.”

I decided to let go of my reflexive contempt for things I don't understand. Also, my inclination to isolate. I made a mental note to refrain from watching *Rocky IV* and *Rocky V* back-to-back upon my first night in New York (though it's amazing the increased emotional depth and narrative tension one can derive from such a coupled viewing experience) and instead to call an old friend who had been having a hard time, to take him out and inquire about his life.

At the trailhead, we flung our bags off and unpacked, returning collective gear (bear canisters, tents) to the Balanced Rock pile. Heather suggested that I might have lost some tent stakes, but I think that was her way of expressing sadness at my impending departure. The group stood together, murmuring, hugging. Wheatgrass recipes and chakra aligner phone numbers were exchanged.

I needed to honor and care for myself and my cravings, so I pulled out my three-legged camping stool and, in the middle of the parking lot, as the universe flitted and whirled about me, as the past receded and the future stretched ahead, both unreal, I embraced the moment, and my proud, plucky three-legged backpacking stool, the unfair target of so much mockery. I honored my cravings some more and gnawed on a chocolate bar I had stolen from the group stash.

A couple of the trekkers cut me dirty looks, but I didn't judge them.

“Namaste,” I mumbled, and kept eating.

I don't think Authentic Steve approved, but I'm not sure. I need to get to know that guy better. ●

Steve Friedman is the author or co-author of seven books, including Eat & Run (with Scott Jurek) and Driving Lessons: A Father, A Son, and The Healing Power of Golf.