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Sky's the Limit: Yogis Head Outdoors

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ONE night early this month, hundreds of yogis accustomed to grounding to the earth figuratively did so literally, on the green expanse of lawn near Pier 63 along the Hudson River. Schuyler Grant of the Kula Yoga Project, a founder of the event, Wanderlust Yoga in the City, made in situ additions to the yoga canon, suggesting, “Reach your heart to the water,” and encouraging participants to try handstands on the forgiving grass.

Traditionally practiced outdoors, yoga obviously is not a hothouse flower to be confined to a studio, yet for years urban yogis tended to relegate open-air practice to retreats in places like Bali or Mexico. That began to change in recent years, and while an exact timeline of the New York outdoor yoga movement is tough to pinpoint, one of the early pioneers was Dana Flynn of Laughing Lotus, who started holding classes in a West Village park in 1997, moving them to a rooftop in 1999.

“We brought the boom box and had Annie Lennox and Al Green blaring into the open sky,” Ms. Flynn wrote in an e-mail. She runs free weekly sunset classes for 80 students on Wednesdays in a park at 10th Avenue and 15th Street near the High Line, a series that began in 2009.

These days, “we are basically in the growth phase for outdoor yoga; every year there are more and more options,” said Ben Fleisher, who helped develop the Yoga Local NYC iPhone application. “It’s at the critical mass where enough people are doing it, so it doesn’t feel weird to be outdoors.”

The Wanderlust event recently held near Pier 63, which blends indie rock and yoga, will be in six other cities this summer; it has already been held in a few. It is a three-and-a-half-hour edition of the weekendlong events held in remote areas, including Stratton, Vt., from Thursday to June 26.

“In New York, practicing outside is becoming more and more common,” said Jeff Krasno, another founder of Wanderlust and Ms. Grant’s husband.

What was once remarkable is now ordinary, as yogis colonize rooftops, beaches and public parks. There are outdoor classes, both free and paid, in every borough.

The streetscape is also fair game, with the Solstice in Times Square being held from 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday. Fitness in the Square, in Union Square, has yoga in the mornings.

There is even surf and turf. Open Ocean Sessions holds Saturday classes, weather permitting, at Rockaway Beach that combine meditation, yoga practice, surfing and a well-earned taco at a local stand. Kristopher Krajewski, an organizer, says that the group practices on hard-packed, not “fluffy,” sand, and that a meditation shelter with Tibetan prayer flags is being built for shade from the sun.

“Ironically, the terrain being not as stable helps to focus our practice,” said Mr. Krajewski, who has a day job running a talent agency, Bond Music Group. “I’ve done yoga in Times Square, and it can be a challenge to find the stillness in the chaos. This is the ocean. It is humbling and easy to interconnect with nature around you.”

The upside of alfresco yoga is obvious. Sarah Schumann, the owner of Shambhala Yoga and Dance Center in Brooklyn, said she loved practicing outdoors at Wanderlust. Why? Ms. Schumann smiled, and gestured with outstretched arms, taking in the sky, the setting sun over the Hudson River, the surrounding trees.

Another enthusiast, Jennifer Carlson, a real estate agent and dancer who does yoga on rooftops and in parks in New York, said she liked the scale of the mass gathering. “To be with so many people and having such quiet in New York City is pretty unique.”

Many participants were not open-air newbies. Vanessa Jovanovich, a recent college graduate, and her friend Tara Curran, a nutritionist, enjoyed Wanderlust, but Ms. Jovanovich asserted that it was “best to do yoga outside without the big crowd.” The friends go to Washington Square Park or Central Park to

practice outdoors. “I like the fresh air and I like it because it tends to be warmer, so I sweat and get rid of all those toxins,” Ms. Jovanovich said.

Practicing alone in a park may be the final frontier, taking more than a little confidence. Rebekah Rotstein, who owns Incorporating Movement, a Pilates studio in the Flatiron district, said she had been trying to practice in Madison Square Park. “I’ll even just go and do headstands, sometimes in my street clothes,” she said. “It is so freeing and liberating being outdoors — it removes my inhibitions.”

For those who are a little more self-conscious, four-month-old Yo Yoga in Midtown Manhattan has a permanent AstroTurf roof deck reached by sliding glass doors. “I know it’s the city, but it is still fresh air, which is important with an exercise that works so much on breathing,” Rebecca Weible, a co-owner, said. “It’s nice not to be in the air-conditioned office air.”

Ms. Weible exhorts students to remember safety first, and come equipped with sunscreen, hat and sunglasses. Mr. Fleisher, the app developer, who manages the YogaLocal Studio at Toren, in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, which has a rooftop deck, agrees the sun can be a negative. “The outdoor deck works when it is not so hot, not so cold,” he said. “Sunscreen when you are sweating and doing asanas can be a bad mix.”

Still, the sunscreen and the distractions, the vagaries of earth and sand, can all help develop the capacity for inner calm. When students are outdoors in savasana, or relaxation pose, Ms. Weible of Yo Yoga said, “I tell people if they find the sky peaceful, keep their eyes open. Of course, New York City is New York City. There’s always a siren going off during savasana.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 21, 2011

Because of an editing error, the Stretch column on Sunday misstated the date for the yoga event Solstice in Times Square. It is being held from 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday; it was not held on Monday.