

# A journey of self discovery

**A trip to a Swedish yoga retreat provided a few surprises and some radical outcomes for Jonathan Schofield**

**BACK TO NATURE:** Canoeing on the Black River. Left, a glimpse of a moose amongst the trees. Below, yoga retreat owner Kari Knight

Photos: CONTRIBUTED

**B**ITTERNs boom as a white-tailed eagle swoops overhead and in the distance I catch a glimpse of a moose lumbering into dense woodland beyond a shimmering river:

It's 7.30am, the morning light is dazzling and I'm taking in this raw, untamed wilderness whilst perched on all fours - or the cat position as it should be called - breathing air so pure I can taste it. This is vastly different to my usual Monday morning position, on a packed commuter train drinking coffee and eating croissants.

A failing body brought me to this nature retreat in Sweden. A decade plus of sitting at a desk hunched over a computer and too many years believing that fitness could only be achieved in gyms, on punishing runs or gruelling bike rides, had taken its toll. With my aching back, sciatic nerve pain and twinging left knee threatening yet another visit to the surgeon, it was clearly time to do something that might ease the inner turmoil of my body - not to mention my mind. But let's not go there.

I'd dabbled in yoga in the past. Tried a few lessons in some dusty school halls. Felt a little ashamed when I couldn't even touch my toes, while the octogenarian lady next to me eased effortlessly into every position. I lacked the

focus to persevere, despite witnessing my mother - a headteacher at a tough school - float through life serenely, without pain, seemingly stress free and a lifetime devotee of yoga.

So I signed up, flew to Vasteras in the Swedish county of Vastmanland and within a few hours of leaving home was being driven towards an idyllic farm house in a minibus with my six fellow yogis.

It was late in the afternoon when Suffolk yoga teacher Kari Knight, who opened the retreat last year, invited us to take part in the first session. A gentle one, hinting at what was to come, but already just hours into life at the retreat I was feeling more relaxed.

Two days into the retreat, sweat is pouring from my brow, I'm trying to breathe deeply but can barely manage small gasps of air as my torso is twisted one way and my head the other. I'm following Kari's soft intonations, placing



my legs and feet in all the places I'm told. I glance down at my tangle of limbs. I begin to wonder how I'm going to untangle myself.

Throwing myself into four hours of yoga a day, from a starting point of nothing, may have been a big jump. There were times in the middle of a session where I found the practice both soul destroying and gloriously uplifting.

We wake early, about 7am, after the deepest sleep. Head out onto the lawn and take part in a series of movements and breathing exercises aimed at ridding the lungs of stale air and invigorating the body. Then we eat a big breakfast of delicious food. Thankfully there are no enemas, no starvation, not even any talk of detox. There's plenty of food, fabulous food, all cooked by Kari's partner Stefan who toils away in the kitchen producing extraordinary vegetarian fare.

I soon discover that when you're not in the 'downward dog' yoga position the landscape of Vastmanland urges you to

explore, to delve off into ancient woodland on foot, on a bike or in a canoe. We spend one afternoon on a meditation walk through woodland that is a place of astounding silence only broken by an owl swooping from a tree above me.

On the second evening I paddle a canoe out onto the Black River at about 10pm. Under a dwindling light that is never quite extinguished I paddle



## travel facts

Kari Knight specialises in Hatha yoga and is based in Suffolk.  
 The retreat Jonathan joined was at Edens Garden, 72692 Skultuna, Sweden.  
[www.edensgarden.se](http://www.edensgarden.se),  
 tel 00 46 70 681 89 87  
 The date of the next retreat is May 23 to 26, 2014.  
 Kari Knight can be contacted on 07941 939645 or by emailing [yoga@kknight.plus.com](mailto:yoga@kknight.plus.com)  
 Retreat cost: £375, with single room supplement of £50  
 Accommodation: shared twin rooms in a traditional wooden Swedish farmhouse.  
 Cost includes transfers, two-hour walking meditation, all vegetarian food and accommodation, yoga sessions and guided meditation.  
 Flights (not included): Ryanair Stansted to Vasteras.  
 Treatments and extra activities available: Tibetan singing bowl massage, traditional massage, Swedish hot tub, Reiki, cycle hire, canoe hire, beaver safari.



**TUCK IN:** Lunchtime at the retreat. Below, some of the vegetarian fare on offer. Bottom, the view from the canoe



**HOLD AND BREATHE:** An early morning yoga session. Left, Jonathan strikes a pose

down river under the watchful gaze of beavers who edge closer and closer before slamming their tails into the water as a warning. A huge bull moose wanders along the riverbank, all spindly legs, oversized antlers and twiddly little ears.

By the end of the third day my shoulders feel heavy, my breathing deeper. I'm not sure if I feel completely disconnected from the world or more connected than ever before.

Then comes the Tibetan singing bowl treatment. Various sized bowls are placed on my body and bonged. At one point I drift off to my childhood, to a long undisturbed memory and see the whole thing played out in fluorescent blue, before floating out of the treatment room and failing to remember how I got there.

Despite this glorious barbecue summer, I haven't touched a single sausage since returning. In fact I haven't eaten any meat, or drunk any alcohol. And if you live anywhere near Long Melford you might have seen me saluting the sun on the water meadows or doing downward dog on the cricket pitch. I can still touch my toes and the deep ache that has gripped the lower part of my back for the last five years has nearly gone. And I've started seeing Kari, every week, in a dusty school hall where I can almost stretch like the octogenarian who so put me to shame once before.

