

# Sunflower Retreats Holidays

Reviews and articles

## My Best Yoga Vacation

Article published in Yoga Journal, USA, in February 2007

Determined to bring yoga along with us on vacation, some of us head to the shore or up to our favorite ski slope toting a yoga mat and maybe a yoga DVD or even a list of poses that our teacher has written down for us. Others of us, however, have the intention of bringing a vacation to our yoga. We don't want to mix a little practice with our vacation; we want to go somewhere so we can practice more. And more. And, these days, it's possible to do that not just in India, where yoga began more than 5,000 years ago, but in Thailand, Italy, Costa Rica, Australia, Massachusetts, and Maine. Here, Yoga Journal readers share memories of some of their favorite yoga vacation spots and Nancy O'Driscoll, 35 a Interaction Designer from Boston, Massachusetts wrote the following concerning her trip to Sunflower Retreats in Casperia.

"For our honeymoon, my husband and I spent a blissful week in a sparsely populated medieval village outside Rome. Our days were full of lazy hikes in the surrounding olive fields and hills, bike rides to other villages, amazing local cuisine, and twice-daily yoga classes held in a converted stable. There were only eight of us in the group that week with Jennifer Hubbard, a contracted yoga instructor from California. She had broad knowledge and worked with us to make sure that yoga suited our preferred styles. My husband and I have been following Forrest yoga recently, and there were Iyengar students in the class as well as some people entirely new to yoga. We were all satisfied. Jennifer also offered classes in other topics – most memorably Yoga Nidra.

Accommodations, classes, and a group breakfast are included in the package; other than that you are free to explore the town's other options or, if you have a kitchen in your quarters, to make your own food.

Aside from yoga, we spent time on Sunflower bicycles exploring the countryside and other small towns. The owner led a couple of hikes during the week through the surrounding hills, which are full of amazing trees and plants (not to mention truffles and boars) and are also rich in history, which Alan, the owner, was happy to share."

## Responsible Travel, Summer 2006

### Customer feedback

This was one of the best holidays we have had. It was lovely getting to know a group of people, it was valuable to share a holiday with people who had a common interest. Getting up early for yoga in the morning and having a lovely breakfast was wonderful (we didn't think that we could do it!) Casperia is a wonderful and amazing place to relax in. The staff were so helpful and we were allowed the freedom to be with the group or to be alone. It was truly refreshing and a wonderful experience and we do, and will, highly recommend it to others.

We thought that the holiday definitely benefitted local people and the fact that the old houses were converted and made to feel VERY homely and welcoming was so much better than staying in a hotel, ethically and practically. We were pleased that we could contribute positively to the town of Casperia as tourists. We loved the local supermarket and the fact that we could walk around safely and not need to rely on public transport to find anything of interest.

A wonderful idea for a holiday. Really well organised. Totally relaxing and refreshing. Absolutely beautiful.

A big thankyou to Allan, Lucy, Paolo and Jenny

Jo Arrowsmith

## Yoga retreats article

The Italian Magazine, March 2006

Sunflower Retreats Holidays was founded in 1998 by Lucy Bremner and Alan Scheda. Alan is from Casperia, a beautiful medieval hilltop village in central Italy's Sabina area, one hour north of Rome and Lucy, born in London, a holistic practitioner since 1984 and Yoga teacher, met in the UK in 1994 while Alan was studying in university. The couple travelled together to Alan's home in Casperia regularly, before deciding to move to Italy and create Sunflower Retreats in 1998. The couple had a love for yoga, for nature and for Italy. Combining Casperia's beautiful unspoilt natural and historic surroundings with Yoga and the holistic, seemed a perfect combination, so Sunflower Retreats was born and has been running now for nearly 8 years.

Sunflower Retreats, the first yoga holiday company of its kind in Italy, is based around health and relaxation, good food, Italian culture, eco-tourism and nature. Through the different activities that are organised such as the morning daily yoga class, excursions to sulphur baths and wild hot springs, a wide range of holistic treatments from aromatherapy to La Stone, guided walks in the Sabina mountains and horseriding they offer each guest a historic cultural experience while staying in an Italian medieval village alongside local people, as well as offering a journey into the self through yoga, relaxation and wellbeing treatments.

The company also has a strong eco-tourism policy. Using local houses for their accommodations, they work with the villagers and employ local people in order to enhance the local economy and integrate the concept of eco-tourism into the culture of Sabina. Alan and Lucy say Sunflower Retreats has, in some ways, brought the village alive again. "By bringing our visitors, locals now realise that it is a place worth looking after. Around 7 years ago local people did not take an interest in the village. Young people were leaving. Over the last 7 years the local council and community have begun to invest in the village, restoring properties and keeping the village clean, this is largely to do with all of the international visitors Sunflower retreats have brought."

Alan designed walking routes in the countryside around Casperia and presented them to the local council and they have now been created by international students from ONLOS, an international volunteers association providing work force for the environment and social need. "With all this we helped the council of Casperia to be awarded with the Bandiera Arancione which is a recognised award from the Touring Club Italia. This is only given to places which have preserved the nature and announced the historical side and have an eco tourism structure. By Sunflower Retreats working in towards eco tourism or responsible tourism we are able to guide local people towards responsible tourism development."

Sunflower's aim is for its visitors to enjoy an authentic Italian village lifestyle and benefit from a truly holistic and spiritual experience, as well as working with the community of Casperia to preserve the natural beauty of the area. Sunflower's new venture, a Lounge Café offering traditional local food and wine, will enable them to go further in bringing the local people and visitors from abroad together. Here foreigners and locals alike can sit, listen to music, play cards and enjoy the traditional local food specialties and wine.

## Reviews from the Responsible Travel web site

Na Xue wrote...

I would like to say thank you again to give me such a special Easter holiday in Italy, it has been great....I love it so much, I wish I have more time to stay longer... The Yoga class and practice with you has been brilliant. Although I have been practising Yoga casually in UK, I can tell the huge difference after 5 days serious practice under your supervision, it has been one of the most amazing thing in my life so far...I don't know how to describe it in any language, but you really are amazing. The Yoga notes you gave me is so helpful... I am seriously thinking about professional Yoga learning and will keep you updated on this one, hopefully, I will come back in the future to practice under your supervision in the beautiful Casperia....

Karen Basra wrote...

My friend and I booked a fantastic holiday with this operator to Casperia in Italy. We stayed in an amazing palazzo full of great architecture and antiques for the price of a normal hotel. Many people we met including ourselves had travelled extensively and agreed that Casperia was a beautiful scenic and unspoiled paradise. The company had thought of everything; there was freedom to do what you wanted or take part in all types of interesting activities including daily yoga and excursions.

This Medieval village was surrounded by organic farms and the operator ensured we were able to eat in a handful of local restaurants which all served excellent fresh food. I would highly recommend this holiday and travel company to anyone, there were many ways they had developed sustainable tourism in this village and it could be used as a model of good practice. I and the 20 or so other tourists who stayed in the village were very impressed and delighted with our choice. Everyone agreed they would holiday there again, indeed we met a few people who had extended their stay by 1-2 weeks.

Jonathon Bray wrote...

Went for a week but got more than a week's worth of relaxation and renewal out of it. It was a good combination of structured activity - in the morning with the yoga and in the evening with shared meals. The rest of the time you had the freedom to do what you wanted. Lots of activities and additional yoga or massages you could buy into. I chose to spend the days doing exactly what I wanted which usually included setting off to wander through the wonderful local countryside in search of a fabulous extended lunch - culinary bliss out!

Handy for Rome too - so squeezed in a weekend there - never having been before. Italy is hard to beat - best food in the world, best culture, one of the best lifestyles. With this holiday you can immerse yourself in it whilst toning yourself up with yoga, and de-stressing in your very own medieval hill village. Thoroughly recommend it!

Jo Stephens wrote...

I went on a yoga holiday to Italy, it was really good. The accommodation was basic (Option A) but the quality of instruction for the yoga was excellent. There was one person in my party.

## Italian time travel for beginners

Olivia Mackinder, Teletext Travel Reviews ([www.teletext.co.uk](http://www.teletext.co.uk)), 24th August 2005

The Medieval hilltop village of Casperia offers an intimate insight into Italian history, overlooking a landscape marked out with olive groves, sweeping valleys and dark green woodland - all just 45-minutes (and less than £2.50) by train from Rome. It is one of a number of fortified Italian villages in the Rieti province of Lazio built to keep out invaders after the fall of the Roman Empire. It was originally called Aspra, meaning bitter, because of the taste it left in the mouths of its enemies after they'd failed to penetrate its thick stone walls.

Completely pedestrianised, Casperia is now home to just 350 people and many of the buildings are empty, but this adds to the atmosphere. Overlooking stunning scenery, it is beautiful, dramatic and moreover, it's a place with a past. This gives it far more substance than a shiny, modern resort. Visit the Forani Palace, the mysterious, brooding home of the counts of Casperia, at the heart of the village or the Church of St John the Baptist. Hidden away at the back is a scale model of the village. Meticulously recreating every nook and cranny, it took a local man 10 years to complete.

Casperia and the surrounding area is known for its cow, sheep and goats cheeses, as well as delicious organic ice-creams. There's plenty of fresh pasta and the locally-produced Sabina olive oil is an award winner. Olive oil and wine-tasting are both available within the village. Take advantage of the free guided walks through the countryside. The surrounding forests are home to a wealth of wildlife, including porcupines, snakes, wild boar and visiting wolves from the Abruzzo mountains.

High up in the hills, you can also visit the hermitages where those searching for divine illumination spent their days in the darkest, coolest recesses of the caves. St Francis of Assisi lived and taught in the nearby mountains and the town of Assisi is two hours away. Here, you'll find the spectacular Basilica of San Francesco, one of Italy's most important religious monuments, which also houses the most impressive collections of 13th and 14th-century art outside a gallery. For more details, see [assisionline.com](http://assisionline.com)

Although hooking up with excursions to local sites of interest is easy with either with Sunflower Retreats - and gives you the chance to meet people - you will have more flexibility if you hire a car in Rome on your arrival. Orvieto, an hour away from Casperia draws holidaymakers with a love of art, culture and history. The Corpus Domini Festival is held there every June and involves a costumed parade through the streets. The thermal baths at Terme dei Papi in Viterbo are worth a day's visit. Spa treatments are available at the four-star Hotel Niccolo V nearby and you can grab a sun lounger under the pine trees to top up your tan. Just up the road, you'll find bathing pools of sulphur-rich, silky-smooth organic mud. Although the scenery isn't particularly attractive, your skin will feel much softer after a liberal coating.

A holiday in Casperia is all about immersion: immerse yourself in the people, the atmosphere and the past. For culture vultures and those seeking the buzz of the city, Rome is close at hand. But by getting to know the village and its surroundings, by taking the pace of life down a notch, taking a trip back in time has its own rewards.

If you're not hiring a car, the cheapest and easiest way to reach Casperia is by train from Rome Fiumicino Airport to Poggio Mirteto where a free bus operates to the village. From Rome Ciampino, you'll need to get a transfer to Tiburtina station before taking the Orte train to Poggio Mirteto.

Sunflower Retreats (tel: (0039) 0116 2599422) offer daily yoga classes, holistic therapies and free bike hire. The founders are advocates of eco-tourism, supporting the community economically and putting profits back into local festivals and functions. They work hard to raise the area's profile and preserve its environmental and cultural heritage.

## Joanne Heath, Yoga Teacher and writer.

September 2004

Casperia is a one thousand year old, magical medieval village built on the top of the Sabina Mountains, one hour north of Rome, surrounded by valleys and distant mountains, lush green fields and tiny farm houses scattered perfectly. The fresh crisp air is scented with open fires burning and wood-fired pizzas.

Three hundred and fifty souls sleep here, many more go about their business as day breaks. The imperfection of stone cottages and cobble streets spill charm and character onto the narrow pavements. Village cats wander the pedestrian streets, a dog will sometimes walk with you a while. Rarely do I feel alone here. An obvious language barrier forges connections of a special kind. Communication takes on a whole new meaning as the best in instinctive human nature kicks in - a welcoming smile, a courteous nod. People look you in the eyes here.

The tomatoes so red, the yolks of the eggs a vibrant orange. Your taste buds reflect the colours here. Everything is pure. From the olive oil to the finest parmesan cheese, eating is a pleasure never to be rushed. Like a three dimensional painting, it looks too perfect to be real. I remember being mesmerized as I ate my breakfast that first morning, the warm sun melting away any memories of winter. The sweet taste of things to come.

Being so high in the mountains I feel closer to nature than ever before. Migrating swallows from Africa fill the sky. Hours can pass as you watch the clouds take on different shapes every few minutes, creating a new masterpiece on the pale blue canvas.

'Buon giorno' they say as you wander down the street. People here think nothing of chatting for five minutes before moving on. 'Come stai?' they ask. No one is in too much of a hurry to ask how you are. Silence surrounds me as night falls. The sound of a cow bell ringing or dogs in the distance having their nightly chat across the valley sends me to sleep every night. The odd firework display or the faint sound of the village choir in rehearsal makes this place almost surreal with incidental, spontaneous beauty.

It's the simple things that I cherish here. The cold fresh mountain water, the sound of the swallows at day break, the warmth of the locals. My 94 year old mate Lucia pinches my cheek, gives me a hug and then sets off to pick chicory in the fields decked out in gum boots and armed with a wooden stick. Priceless...

I feel truly blessed and protected here. For some reason this gift has been given to me. With four weeks to go I'm going to slowly finish opening the best present I've ever been given..... one day at a time.

## Beginners Yoga

Christopher Mouze Yoga Magazine and Website Ireland

Written by Roy Peters

Before I went to Casperia the only bit of yoga I had done was part of a class I do twice a week at my local gym which incorporates elements of Tai Chi with Pilates as well as yoga. I had chosen Sunflower from The Retreat Company's website partly because it was non-denominational as it were, and partly because the day started with an hour and three quarters of yoga.

Starting and ending in Shivasana was wonderful. The start prepared you for the class, and the end for the rest of day. Through the relaxation there were pathways to meditation either by bringing your awareness to your breathing or via visualisation. I was fairly sure at the time that I was meditating, but whatever I was doing brought a glow to my being and a feeling of calm and serenity. And love. I've since done a course on various meditation techniques and approaches and I am now certain that I was genuinely meditating!

One day we practised on the roof. We did our sun salutations as the sun rose. Slightly chilly at first, once the sun came up from behind the mountain, our faces were warmed. I also had a one-to-one session on the roof top in the afternoon and the experience was just as good - maybe better - as I was receiving individual tuition.

The quality of the air in Casperia, and the setting with its gorgeous views, are stunning. Doing yoga enabled me to appreciate these simple things more to the full and without seeking after anything else or feeling the need to. The weather helped. Mid October, the temperatures were between 28 and 32 degrees in the day, cooling down significantly and pleasantly at night because we were in the Sabine mountains.

Apart from an interest in yoga - with varying amounts of experience - different people went for different things. Some went to de-stress or just to have a break. Others are after 'the still point of the turning world' or something more spiritual. The Sunflower approach, run by Alan and Lucy, can cater for all. It also lays on a suite of alternative therapies which you book on the first morning and which take place in the afternoons over the next four days. These include Reiki, Chakra Balancing, Indian Head Massage, Shiatzu massage, Individual Yoga lessons, Aloe Vera treatments. Additionally an array of bikes was available for our use with various rides and their levels of difficulty indicated. This proved to be a fantastic way of enjoying the countryside and getting some exercise.

Situated between Rome and Assisi, Casperia is in an ideal location for a jaunt to either of these places but Sunflower do lay on a number of excursions which you can opt in or out of. The visit to the thermal baths and springs in Viterbo is a 'must' among these. Likewise in the evening there is transport laid on (at minimal extra cost) to local restaurants which have fine food and wines at extremely reasonable prices. I did my own (and very moving)

pilgrimage to Assisi whilst I was there and Alan organised the transport to and from the station.

One of things we all look for in a holiday and hope for in a retreat, is that some of the benefit experienced at the time can stay with us on our return. This has certainly been the case for me. Not only have I signed up to a yoga class, bought a couple of recommended books, acquired a mat, chosen my rose quartz and started burning my essential oils, and also pursuing meditation, the actual qualities of life as experienced on retreat still remain with me. These can be summed up as keeping things simple, don't rush so much, take people for who they are and accept that others will do likewise to you.

The word Casperia now summons up more than just a mere place. It is unquestionably about beautiful views, gorgeous food and pure air. At the same time, it became synonymous with peace, serenity, nice people and meaningful yoga. Thank you Sunflower, thank you Lucy Bremner, inspirational yoga teacher.

## Refreshing the parts other trips can't reach

The Times 12th of July 2003

David Smith discovered that occasionally stretching himself a little really wasn't that bad

I booked a yoga holiday in Italy in a fit of madness. Or guilt. Or optimism. The last time I touched my toes was back in the Seventies. When I first went into Fleet Street, my karma took one look at the newsroom and ran away screaming. At around the same time my Inner Self realised that, in order to get on with people (editors in particular), it was necessary to stay indoors, shut up and let my Outer Self do all the talking. As for Nirvana, I usually found it after deadline, locked away in a subterranean wine bar. As the holiday approached, a nagging worry persisted: what if the other eight people on my course turned out to be stereotypical yoga types: brown-rice-eating, tree-hugging, clean-living neo-hippies? At one with the universe and their inner selves. The sort who wouldn't pollute their bodies with tobacco or alcohol. And retire to bed at nine. You understand why I was fretting.

As it turned out, those nagging worries ended up being the very things we all had in common. We spent our first evening together making polite conversation in the local Italian restaurant. The menus arrived and the call went up: "Any vegetarians?" No one responded, a good sign. By the time we had demolished three bottles of red and ordered a fourth, we could relax and admit that we had all been dreading feeling like fish out of water. From now on, we were a bonded community. Man. Much, much later, as the town clock inched towards 3am and we stumbled up the steep, cobbled streets of our little Italian town back to our rooms I knew I was in for a relaxing week. With a bit of yoga thrown in.

When you're single and forty-something, picking a holiday can be tricky. There are plenty of activity holidays for singles, such as horse riding, mountain climbing, and sailing, but where's the relaxation? Where's the holiday? The only form of exercise I take is fastening my shoelaces. I did go to a gym once. The instructor gave our little group a quick run through of what damage each machine could inflict upon us if misused, and then left us to it. I changed back into my civvies immediately and went awol, never to return. Now, however, my body has started to complain, especially when I bend over to tie my shoelaces. I let out an involuntary groan that sounds like Jimmy Connors serving on Centre Court. Yoga. That's what I needed, I thought. Sitting cross-legged on a pink mat having comforting thoughts of being thin again and chanting "homm".

What could be nicer than learning all about this ancient Indian art in the peace of Casperia, a walled medieval town in the Sabine mountains an hour's train journey from Rome, with good wine and coffee on tap if it all became too much? The yoga classes kicked off at 8.30am: a bad time of day without an injection of PG Tips. A gang of alley cats eyed us on our first morning as we made our way through the empty streets to a terrace on top of a 16th-century municipal building, where our classes were held. Swallows flitted over our heads, while down in the valley a distant tractor gently chugged, ploughing the land.

Then there was Lucy. Ah, Lucy. A living advert for the benefits of yoga. Tall and slim, with the poise of a ballet dancer. When she bent over to touch her toes and laid her palms on the ground by her feet, her nose touching her knees, with her legs perfectly straight, I nearly cried. Do not try this at home without medics standing by.

Slowly and methodically Lucy took us through the basic yoga positions: the dog, the cat, the mountain, the cobra and so on. I could feel my tired and taut muscles, honed in the sweatshops of journalism, beginning to stretch out. Lucy informed us how each of these asanas benefited our bodies. "This asana is good for the thyroid gland. This one is excellent for getting the liver energy moving."

Once we had these movements mastered we came to the "Sun Salutation", a series of energetic asanas. Then the scales fell from my eyes. My body was exercising. How did that happen? I could feel my heart tap-dancing on my ribcage, muscles were stretching and aching. I was out of breath, hot in the face. Yet I felt OK. To finish we lay down on our mats, feet apart, with our palms pointing to the sun, chins pointing to our heaving chests, and eyes closed. Lucy spoke to us hypnotically as we drew Prana (vital energy) through our noses into our bodies. This was the kind of yoga I'd envisaged, and I loved it. Even with a bit of a hangover and suffering from lack of sleep, turning off my mind was proving difficult. Lucy coaxed us: "Just concentrate on your breathing. As a thought enters, let it go on the out breath." It was as if she were inside my head. All of us experienced a slow drifting, I suppose, into a meditative state. It lasted only a couple of minutes, but my brain definitely switched off. I liked it. When I opened my eyes, I felt as if I were floating.

Now I wished I'd listened to my yoga-mad friends years ago when they first waxed lyrical about it. If I'd taken it up back then I might not have such a beer gut and handles on my love handles. But as Penelope Cruz's character in the film *Vanilla Sky* says: "Every passing moment is another chance to turn it all around."

After the class we all wandered down to the bar for caffeine and croissants. The rest of the day was our own, to spend as we chose, either in company or alone. There are wild hot springs near by, and Rome and Assisi are close enough for a day trip.

Men should note that on a holiday such as this, you will be heavily outnumbered by women. But your inner macho self can have a well-deserved holiday, which can only be a good thing.

Ultimately, however, Italy and yoga do not go together like yin and yang. Italy is too steeped in sin and sensuality, and yoga too steeped in virtue and spirituality for them to be perfect partners. Italy and food - now, that's a perfect coupling. Back in London I jumped on my bathroom scales. Dismay! I'd gained half a stone. Ho homm.

## Sunflower Retreats

Sharon Jones writing on Tiscali's web site

Yoga. You've seen what it's done for celebs like Madonna and Geri. You bought the Barbara Currie DVD from Amazon and did it every Sunday in your living room. Your little blue mat has survived from being lobbed in to the back of the cupboard, unlike all your other fitness fad equipment. It's crept in to your gym schedule and now you're doing it three times a week with your mate and saying Shanti to anyone who'll listen. You love the benefits, and enjoy it's trendy status, but would you go on a yoga holiday? Or is that only for the serious, lentil-eating, tree-hugging types?

Well, Tiscali sent Sharon Jones off to Italy on a yoga holiday to find out . . .

Yoga is big business these days. Thanks to some dedicated high profile followers, it's lost its dreary hippie image and is now somewhat of a fashionable lifestyle choice. It's cool to do yoga, and with its many variations from Bikram yoga, which you do at 100 degrees, to hybrids like yoga boxing, there's something for everyone and the same applies to holidays. If you go online and search for yoga holidays you'll find a whole host of places offering breaks where you can do yoga and unwind. You can stay in the UK or travel to far-flung lands to get bendy. The choice is yours.

Sunflower Retreats is a Leicester based firm that specialises in

week-long holistic breaks to Italy. Set in the beautiful Sabina Mountains, Casperia is an ancient medieval town that is an hour away from Rome. It's in the region of Lazio, which is close to Tuscany and Umbria. Surrounded by olive groves, tree-covered mountains, this hill top village is the perfect setting for a relaxing break. The scenery is breath-taking and because the area is barely touched by tourism you really feel that you've got access to something special.

Lucy Bremner is the founder of Sunflower Retreats, which she and her husband have been running for four years. And at the age of 33, she's got an impressive CV, with over 15 years of yoga experience, a shed load of holistic qualifications (from massage to chakra balancing) an extremely well stamped passport (she spent many years in India) and a young toddler (whom she gave birth to in half an hour without any drugs), she's an inspiration to most. Her ethos behind the holiday is simple, she just offers a glimpse in to yourself for a week.

Hatha yoga is the backbone of the holiday, but it's an optional activity. It's perfect for beginners or experienced yogis and Lucy is a gentle teacher. Mats are provided and the surroundings are perfect for a 90 minute session. You will feel quite invigorated afterwards and ready to face the day ahead. Other activities that you can do range from horse-riding in the mountains, excursions to ancient villages, to visiting a natural sulphur spa. Bicycles are included with the price of your break and there are a number of routes which make for a decent cycle. Unfortunately, the week I went, the bikes were a little worse for wear and could have done with a bit of TLC, especially to the tyres and breaks which are essential for those hilly roads.

Sunflower Retreats also offer a range of therapies. You can have anything from a simple facial, a shiatsu massage or acupressure to an enlightening Chakra Balancing session. They are all reasonably priced but they are not too different from what you would expect to pay here, so don't expect any bargains just because you are abroad. All are carried out by qualified professionals and are definitely worth the experience if you fancy trying something new.

There are two types of accommodation on this holiday. You can stay in the self-catering house, which are based on six people sharing or you can stay in the hotel. Be warned though, if you are not an early riser, think twice about staying in the house. You might not appreciate being woken up by the church bells ringing furiously at six thirty in the morning. Whatever you choose, breakfast is included in the price, but for those who have to cook, there is a local supermarket where you can buy good Italian staples, like cheese, bread and wine. There are a few local restaurants too, where you can eat a delicious pizza for around £2. And for an extra £5, Sunflower Retreats will taxi you to and from the places that are a little far away without sufficient transport.

For such a short holiday, you can certainly get a lot done or not it's entirely up to you. Doing yoga outside on the terrace, with a postcard view of the mountains and the sun beaming down on you is certainly a memorable experience, as is the horse-riding through the most beautiful countryside.

If you fancy a spot of yoga, with a dose of pampering, great food and stunning scenery, than Sunflower Retreats is for you. You will return home refreshed and relaxed, with a whole new outlook on how you see yourself. The holistic approach is most definitely encouraged and the only essential you need on this holiday is an open mind. And if you still think this isn't for you, next year, Lucy is planning on opening another retreat in the gorgeous region of Tuscany. Now I bet most would not say no to that.

## Stretching a holiday

Elvira Cordileone, Toronto Star, 1 March 2003

The tiny village of Casperia is just an hour outside Rome and the perfect place to unwind with yoga. For two weeks, time hovered as lightly as the morning mist over the surrounding Sabine mountains. Each morning our slumbering minds were ushered into the day by the bells tolling in Casperia's 13th-century tower. Valleys green with olive groves stretched out below.

There is nothing like doing yoga on a medieval stone terrace at the

top of a mountain. Every day at 8:30 a.m., we gathered for class and, even though it was October, there were days when it was warm enough to stretch our bodies and loosen our spirits outdoors. As a long-time practitioner of yoga, I was looking for a vacation where yoga would be part of the package, but I also wanted to go somewhere rich with history. Presto, I found Casperia's Sunflower Retreats on the Internet. The idea of going to Italy appealed to me, especially the notion of getting back in touch with my heritage, although my ancestors don't come from that region. And I had the added advantage of speaking the language, even though my way of speaking it is a mashed version of the real thing.

I talked an old friend, Norma Jean Walker, into coming with me. The brave soul hadn't done yoga for more than 20 years and she was apprehensive about it. But as it turned out, you don't need any previous experience. The teacher is very capable and gives instruction for beginners as well as advanced yoginis. The classes were even given in English.

Each morning we put on our leotards - and sweat shirts when it was cool - and did about an hour of Hatha (classical) yoga. Those looking for vigorous power yoga that's popular with the celebrity crowds should go elsewhere. This is yoga with a focus on breath and alignment, slow and easy. Our teacher, Lucy Scheda, had a thriving yoga practice in Brighton, England, before she married and moved to Casperia. She makes it her business to find out what everyone's health and fitness status is, and then adjusts postures for individual needs. So, for two weeks we lived without the drone of a television set. The guesthouse had no radio either and we were blissfully unaware of world events.

Built on the slope of a small mountain in the Lazio region of Italy, Casperia is a mere hour north-west of Rome by train. An ancient wall that 1,000 years ago kept out all manner of barbarians, rings the medieval village. It has a population of 1,000 but fewer than 350 souls live within the walls. The others occupy country houses nestled among the olive groves that cover the valley as far as the eye can see. We stayed in one of two guesthouses owned by Sunflower Retreats, each with three bedrooms, and able to accommodate a maximum of 12 guests a week. The houses have common living areas with fireplaces and fully equipped kitchens. If you don't have strong legs and a strong heart when you arrive, you'll acquire both by the time you leave. The village is all cobbled steps and sloped walkways. Because of this, cars cannot enter the walled section. They're parked around the road that rings it, the same road where the commuter buses stop, and where the post office, bank, drug store, a small supermarket and pastry shop (the proprietor of this store got to know me well) are situated.

Sunflower Retreats - so named because Italy is filled with sunflowers in June - offers a basic package that includes a daily yoga class, accommodation and continental breakfast and use of bicycles. Day trips to local points of interest, including the hot springs, horseback riding and scooters are available but cost extra. Some of the treatments I opted for during my stay were shiatsu, aromatherapy and a therapeutic massage - all as good as any I've had in Toronto and similarly priced, about \$80 Cdn. Adventurous travellers can hop a bus to neighbouring villages or to the main train line at Poggio Mirteto for treks to Rome or points beyond. We opted for several Sunflower excursions, including a day-long tour of the Sabina region with a stop at Sacro Speco in Narni, one of the hermitages where St. Francis of Assisi lived in the 13th century. I gathered chestnuts from the tree said to have sprouted miraculously from the staff he drove into the Earth. Another trip took us to Poggio Mirteto on market day. I haggled unashamedly with every merchant, street vendor or store clerk, reasoning that since the local people don't ever pay the asking price, neither would I.

In Casperia's tiny village theatre, we saw a one-act play by Chekhov one Saturday night - yes, in Italian. And along with the rest of the townspeople we attended an art gallery opening when sculptor, Johnny Madge, an Englishman who has been living in the village for many years, held his grand opening. And, oh, yes, the food - bursting with the flavour you only get when it comes to you straight from the garden. There was only one restaurant within walking distance, L'Asprese Pizzeria, but the ravioli stuffed with crushed walnuts and ricotta sent a jolt of pleasure straight from the palate to the brain. The most expensive meal we ate was on an ex-

ursion to Rocantica where I ate wild boar in a restaurant operated by a descendent of the original feudal lord - for about \$50.

Alan and Lucy Scheda run Sunflower Retreats. Alan's mother is Welsh, his father is Italian. Now in his 30's, he has been living in Casperia since the age of 3. Lucy is English and has been teaching classical hatha yoga for many years. She is also a certified holistic massage therapist. The couple and their young son live in one of the houses outside the village walls, among olive trees. Our sojourn was spent in comfort, with clean rather than luxurious accommodation and agreeable hosts and fellow guests. The townspeople were warm and welcoming.

"Yes, it is a vacation, but we offer people a journey into themselves and a holistic aspect of Italy. It's harmony and the simplicity of life," said Lucy. "Sunflower isn't promoting anything," said Alan. "We're trying to organize an experience. We want people to come here and have the opportunity to open up to yoga and the basic values of life, to sincerely experience real things, not artificial stimulation." The area is renowned for the talent of its marble cutters, timber workers, electricians and plumbers, who are in high demand in Rome, said Alan. It's also famous for the quality of the locally pressed olive oil. "The Sabina area is not well-known. There are no famous monuments and tourists don't tend to come to the countryside. There's never been industry, only rural farming. It's a harsh area with only hills and mountains," said Alan. Still, by the end of our stay, between yoga, massages, walking, resting and good food, we no longer clutched our chests after scaling the village to reach the guesthouse.

## From The Retreat Company web site

Lucy Bremner of Sunflower Retreats writes

Yoga has been described as the three fold path of development, physical, mental and spiritual. Yoga's purpose is to bring man and woman to the highest states of development on all these levels.

Yoga is an philosophy a way of life and is said to be at least 6,000 years old. Its roots lie in India.

The word yoga means union or joining, in a spiritual sense this refers to Man and Woman's ultimate union with their own inner nature or Atman which is ultimately perfect and is a reflection of the universal source. In regular western life we tend to externalise, which takes us away from our inner selves. Yoga is a way of bringing our awareness more within. It helps us to find more peace of mind, it helps us become more in harmony with our whole self. Without looking to the external world for our daily happiness we begin to look within, retreat within for the answers in our lives and begin to understand that peace and harmony can be obtained within us. The techniques in yoga are a way of balancing and harmonising the mind, body and emotions.

Within the yoga tradition there are many pathways to reach the inner self and to reach harmony and pure consciousness, also the pathways of yoga can practised together. These are:

Jnana Yoga - Union by knowledge

Bhakti Yoga - Union by love and devotion

Karma Yoga - Union by action and service

Mantra Yoga - Union by vision and form

Laya and Kundalini Yoga - Union by arousal of psychic nerve force

Tantric Yoga - A general term for physiological disciplines also for harnessing sexual energy

Hatha Yoga - Union of body and breath mastery

Raja Yoga - Union of mental mastery

In the yoga tradition there are physical as well as psychical controls which aims are to make a whole person aware of his or her individual consciousness and move towards union with the universal consciousness. This can be done by the practice of Asana, Pranayama, mudra, banda and meditation and relaxation (Hatha yoga) which for a lot of people these days has become a popular starting point.

With Hatha yoga, yoga begins to work on the outer aspects of the physical body. Through asanas (physical movements) from the physical body yoga begins to move onto the mental and emotional levels, gradually through continued practise an awareness of one's inner self leads to an understanding of the more subtle areas of existence. The word Hatha is made up on sanskrit roots Ha (meaning 'sun') and Tha ( meaning 'moon'). The connection to the body is that in the yoga tradition the right nostril is said to be controlled by the sun's energy and the left nostril by the moon's energy. Breathing through the nose in yoga practice is said to clear and balance energy channels known as nadis, which run along the spine. These energy channels are connected to the back of the nose, so breathing through the nose is the basis for Hatha yoga although there are breathing practices where you also breath through the mouth.

It is quite easy to begin to practice Hatha yoga at home and by using some of the techniques of Hatha we can gradually learn to relax more and bring our awareness within. Therefore making a small retreat place for ourselves at home so recharge our batteries and let go of the day's stress or tensions.

Try making your own retreat at home by practising Hatha yoga relaxation known as Shavasana:

### Hatha yoga Shavasana relaxation session

Make a sacred space for yourself in your home, light a candle or burn some of your favourite aromatherapy oils in an oil burner or include some fresh beautiful flowers in your practice area, and some soft relaxation music if you like. There are no rigid rules

Bring a mat and lay it on the floor. Lie down on the mat with your feet one hip-width apart, your chin gently brought down to your chest and the palms of your hands facing upwards. Use a cushion if you need to support any area of your body that gives you tension so to be comfortable.

Become aware of your breath. Begin to breathe through your nose, breathe naturally, concentrate on your breath's natural rhythm and breathe as silently as possible. Any thoughts that come into your mind or feelings that arise, just keep bringing your attention back to your breath, or even to the music you are playing. If you hear distractions i.e. noise outside, a dog barking or something, do not see the sound as a distraction - bring it into your yoga practice.

Begin to feel your whole body relax and begin to soften towards the pull of gravity, relax your feet, your ankles, knees, upper legs, hips lower back, lower abdomen, feel the whole of your back relax, your spine the muscles of your back relax towards the floor or earth. Move your awareness to your upper abdomen, chest, shoulders arms and hands even your fingers and thumbs feel them relax, with each inhalation begin to visualise each breath reaching these areas of your body like a white light and with each out breath just feel as if you are exhaling any tension away towards the earth the pull of gravity.

Continue to travel up to your head and face relaxing your head and face, visualising each breath in like a healing tonic. Or white light surrounding and tonifying the skin and muscles of your face and each breath out like a way to let go and relax more, relax your jaw and mouth even your tongue. Then begin to relax your mind, focus you attention on your breathing each thought that comes in let it flow in with each inhalation and with each breath out let each thought go with the out breath, detach from the thoughts and concentrate on your breath.

Then begin to move down your body once again being aware of your face, head, upper body lower body and finally your feet.

Become aware of the floor, which is supporting you and the space around you, gently roll to your right side and slowly come up in a crossed legged sitting position.

While sitting in the crossed-legged position repeat the word OM three times, once for your body, once for your mind and finally once for your inner self which is a reflection of the universal source

The word 'yoga' really does cover a large area. My feelings are that yoga is harmony, and a deep connection to our inner self and the rest of the natural world, nature as a whole and ultimately the connection and union with the divine within us and within others.

### Yoga and Childbirth

#### An interview with Lucy Bremner of Sunflower Retreats, Italy

Lucy Bremner, mother of Siena and Lawrence, yoga teacher, holistic health practioner and retreat founder was interviewed by Sara Rossi yoga teacher and writer from Costa Rica.

What does 'birthing consciously' mean to you?

It means being in touch with my body and my soul and that of my unborn child, connecting with my higher self and my physical body to guide me while giving birth. This conscious connection helps the unborn child begin the process of moving from the womb (the universe) down the cervix into the physical world.

According to you, what is the connection between yoga and giving birth? What was your experience?

Yoga's techniques helped me in a number of ways. They helped me to prepare for the birth through the practice of asana, pranayama, meditation/ visualization and relaxation.

While giving birth, yoga helped me with my breathing and the asanas I practiced while in labour made me more in control of my body, giving birth naturally and actively without using drugs of any sort. Using asanas and pranayama while in labour & experiencing strong contractions was a real help.

And ultimately yoga's meditation and spiritual teachings helped me detach from the discomfort or pain that comes with labour and birth and to let go and trust the force of nature, therefore my child could leave the womb and enter the world naturally and as stress free as possible.

Giving birth naturally made me aware we are part of the animal kingdom, but that we are also gifted with a spiritual awareness and consciousness. If you tune into this higher conciousness, as well as being connected to the earth, it can guide you through your labour and birth

For me giving birth was the most challenging, spiritual and most beautiful experience of my life and yoga helped me in so many and would recommend yoga to any mother-to-be, pre and post natal.