

Egypt's First International Yoga Festival, El Gouna 1-7 March 2006

Independent Yoga Register member, Heather George was recently invited to be a Guest of Honour at Egypt's first international yoga festival held at El Gouna on the Red Sea from 1-7 March 2006 organised by TEN Tours of Cairo.

This was the first yoga festival to be held in any Arab country and was the result of the synergistic efforts of a number of far-sighted organisations and individuals. They first had to overcome latent objections to yoga from government and religious leaders who had concerns about the perceived religious implications of yoga and its Hindu origins.

More than 200 participants and teachers from across the world were provided with the unique opportunity to learn, discuss, absorb and practice Yoga in the magical resort of El Gouna on the Red Sea.



The festival was opened by His Excellency A Gopinathan, the Indian Ambassador to Egypt. He is shown centre front with his wife together with festival organizers and yoga teachers.

(front left) Dr Prabhakar Madhikar (advisor to the festival) and his wife, (second row) Aicha Wassef, Director of the New Horizon International School in Cairo and organizing team, Marianne Simonin (originally France now London), Anthony Sadasiva (New York), Nisha Toppin (London), Barbara Gordon (originally Scotland now Egypt), Heather George (Staines, Middx). (third row) Norbu Oberdorfer (Austria), Christina Magalhaes (originally Portugal, now Gloucestershire), Mercedes Ngoh (London from Canada via California), Tony Davis (IYR Reporter, Staines Middx), (Back) Hosam Darwish (festival director) and Guru Wafaa (Cairo)

Each day started with meditation on the beach at 6am, followed by yoga at 7:30. Classes included Hatha, Sivananda, Iyengar, Flow, Ananda, and Ashtanga yoga. There were then workshops and seminars covering the history and philosophy of yoga, macrobiotics, sports yoga, Tai Chi, pranayama, meditation, visualization, bio-magnetic healing and yoga for children. This was followed by further yoga practice, meditation or Yoga Nidra each evening.

Heather had the wonderful opportunity to teach her dynamic Flow Yoga on the beach by the waters of the Red Sea as well as running workshops on meditation, chakra breathing and visualization. Her class was filmed together with an interview for a health channel on MBC TV. She has also been asked to contribute to a travel health magazine.

The origins of the festival go back to 1992 when Egypt and India introduced a bilateral cultural exchange programme. This resulted in the establishment of the Indian Cultural Centre in their Embassy in Cairo. The then Ambassador to Egypt, Mr PA Nazareth had the idea of offering yoga to the Egyptian people so that they could benefit from its scientific approach with resulting improvements in quality of life. The charismatic and inspirational yogi, Dr Prabhakar Madhikar, was brought over from Hyderabad to be the first director. Doctors, journalists, academics and other professionals were amongst the many who took up the opportunity to take part in yoga classes. As opinion formers, they helped spread the message to the rest of Cairo of the benefits to physical, mental and spiritual health that could be gained from practicing yoga. Indeed there has never been any advertising, growth has all been through word of mouth, partly because the initiative was not intended as a commercial proposition. Its success has resulted in the production of a TV series on yoga that has been broadcast on 9 international sports channels across the Arab world.

Dr Prabhakar, who now runs a yoga rehabilitation practice in Cairo, had for some time been thinking about creating a gathering of people interested in yoga to help promote it. One of Egypt's leading tourist companies T.E.N. Tours was also looking for ways of boosting tourism and had the idea of a yoga festival and approached Dr Prabhakar. How yoga is that ? That the two bodies that between them could make such an event happen, should have the same idea at the same time and actually come together. Before it could be set up, there was the task of overcoming latent objections to yoga from government and religious leaders who still had concerns about the perceived religious implications of yoga and its Hindu origins. Fortunately Dr Yogita Mehta of the Indian Cultural Centre had previously conducted a seminar on yoga at the New Horizon International School in Cairo. Aicha Wassef the School Director had herself benefited significantly from practicing yoga and agreed to approach government and religious leaders to explain that there were no religious connotations to yoga and thus remove objections. Aicha's gentle and sincere persuasion won the day.

Unbelievably these initial approaches only started in November 2005 and a mere 3 months later the event took place, a quite remarkable achievement.

The festival was hosted in the stunning resort of El Gouna on the Red Sea. Nestled between the Sienna mountains and azure waters, this resort town has evolved to be one of the Red Sea's most sought after destinations. The name El Gouna stems from the Arabic translation of lagoon and is very descriptive of the network of islands on which the resort is built linked by bridges crossing the many lagoons. It is the brainchild of Samih Sawiris, Charman of Orascom, one of the largest and most successful conglomerates in Egypt who developed the resort. Samih's passion for the sea drew him to the area located on a cove created by the natural coral reefs engulfing the desert coast with the backdrop of mountains. He built a marina and his home. He was soon joined by other like minded people. The city developed organically by the creative diversity of this local community of entrepreneurs, artists, and environmentalists who made El Gouna their home. It offers wonderful accommodation, from intimate guest houses to deluxe five-star hotels. The modern arabesque architecture and unique interior design are really quite breathtaking. As well as diving on the coral reefs, there are a number of other water sports available and an 18 hole PGA golf course. It is a fitting

venue to hold a yoga festival as “Green Gouna” has goals to develop El Gouna into an ecotourism destination. It pursues this goal by involving the entire community in the protection and preservation of the delicate Red Sea environment through education, recycling, clean-up campaigns, environmental festivals and the establishment and enforcement of environmental rules and regulations throughout El Gouna. Finally there was the friendly and caring welcome we all received from the Egyptian people. A truly memorable experience.

TEN Tours are now planning the second international festival to be held on 2-7 April 2007. It will be well worth attending.

Links

Heather George – heather@omtropy.com

TEN Tours - www.tentours.com

Egypt Yoga Festival – egyptyogafestival.com

El Gouna – www.elgouna.com