

finding balance



**one pose at a time*



The Tides' Yoga Pavilion provides students with views of Zihuatanejo Bay and the Pacific Ocean.

A lapsed yogini gets back to basics during a luxury retreat in Mexico.

By Annette Burden

YOUR CENTER OF GRAVITY FEELS higher after five days of yoga. Your spine stretches taller, your legs seem longer, and your glutes ride higher on your frame. True, this physical lift may be an illusion—I wish I'd measured—but the shift to a higher mental state is as real as the smile on your face.

I arrived at The Tides Zihuatanejo, located on Mexico's serene southwestern shore, for my first yoga retreat with trepidation. Having lapsed in my yoga practice for more than a year, I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to keep up with the others or, worse, that I would hurt myself. In preparation, I had cut back on calories for two weeks and had added a second Pilates class to my usual once-a-week schedule. But, still, I worried. The retreat involved 12 hours of yoga over five days, which was far more intense than my usual exercise schedule. I imagined myself pulling a muscle, unhinging a joint, and going home in a wheelchair. As it turned out, I had nothing to fear.

The first yoga session of the retreat was scheduled a few hours after my arrival, which gave me plenty of time to enjoy The Tides' in-room welcome: guacamole and chips, a fresh margarita, and a pitcher of hibiscus tea on my coffee table, along with "Welcome Ms. Burden" spelled out in flower petals on my bed. I even tried out the private plunge pool bubbling on my balcony.

Refreshed from my dip, I pulled on a pair of yoga pants, a racer-back tank, and a loose cover-up and found my way through a maze of winding paths to the thatched-roof Yoga Pavilion, where all the classes would be held. The view was heavenly: The pavilion faces the setting sun, Zihuatanejo Bay, and the Pacific Ocean from the justly famous Playa La Ropa, a pristine white crescent of powder-soft sand.

The friendly, laid-back demeanor of the other nine yoga students and instructor Tom Morley put me at ease right away. Morley's advice to our group was to spend the next few days savoring the gift of existence as

it unfolded moment to moment—and to listen to our bodies. Along with these words came the invitation to skip a class, arrive late or leave early, rest in Child's Pose, or modify an asana according to what felt right.

Relieved from any pressure to perform at the level of others or push myself to the limit, I eased into my first session slowly. Instead of arching backward into Wheel Pose (similar to a backbend), I kept my shoulders on the mat and simply lifted my hips into Bridge. Rather than fully raising the top half of my body into Upward-Facing Dog, I stayed closer to the ground in Cobra. Like some others in the group, I used a block for balance during Half Moon Pose, and instead of doing *Chaturanga Dandasana* (a push-up-like posture that can challenge even seasoned practitioners), I did a modified version, dropping my knees, chest, and chin to the floor. I also took extended breaks between postures, relaxing in Child's Pose and concentrating on the steady in and out of my breath.

While the retreat revolved around yoga, I think it's safe to say that for most—if not all—of us, it was also about joining a group of like-minded people and getting away from day-to-day distractions. According to Morley, who holds about five retreats a year at high-end resorts all over the world, every retreat has its own character, influenced by the time and location, the group's size (generally 10 to 25 people), and the personalities involved. "Some groups want to party, party, party," he said with a grin. "Others, like this one, are mellow. I never go to a retreat with a specific intention, only to facilitate whatever's going to happen between the people who come."

My fellow students at The Tides consisted mostly of couples—devotees of Morley's classes at Maha Yoga, a studio in Los Angeles' tony Brentwood district. He knew their goals, habits, and quirks, and they knew his teaching style, which focused less on adjusting alignment than most others I've seen. His approach draws from Vinyasa Yoga, Power Yoga, and Yin Yoga. (The first two focus on muscle, while Yin Yoga works on connective tissue through long-held stretches.) He also incorporates partner exercises, *pranayama* (controlled breathing), and massage techniques depending on the mood and makeup of the group.

His choice of music—everything from hip-hop to Andrea Bocelli played from an iPod hooked up to several large speakers—contributes a powerful energy to his classes, but the real focus is on breathing, concentration, contemplation, and encouragement. One of my favorite moments occurred one evening as I lay off to the side, spread-eagle on my mat, lost in the music while most of the other students stood at attention in Warrior II Pose. As Morley came closer, I began to feel self-conscious and gather myself. But he leaned down and whispered, "Don't worry. You're perfect. Just listen to your body."



1 A floral footbath is the first step of a pedicure at The Tides Zihuatanejo. **2** Lanterns illuminate the spa's relaxation area. **3** The nearby Playa La Ropa is a nesting site for the endangered leatherback turtle. **4** Mexican specialties like ceviche and tequila are served at the resort's Coral Bar. **5** The property opens out onto powder-white sand. **6** Tom Morley's yoga retreats include sunset sessions.

ANNETTE BURDEN (6)



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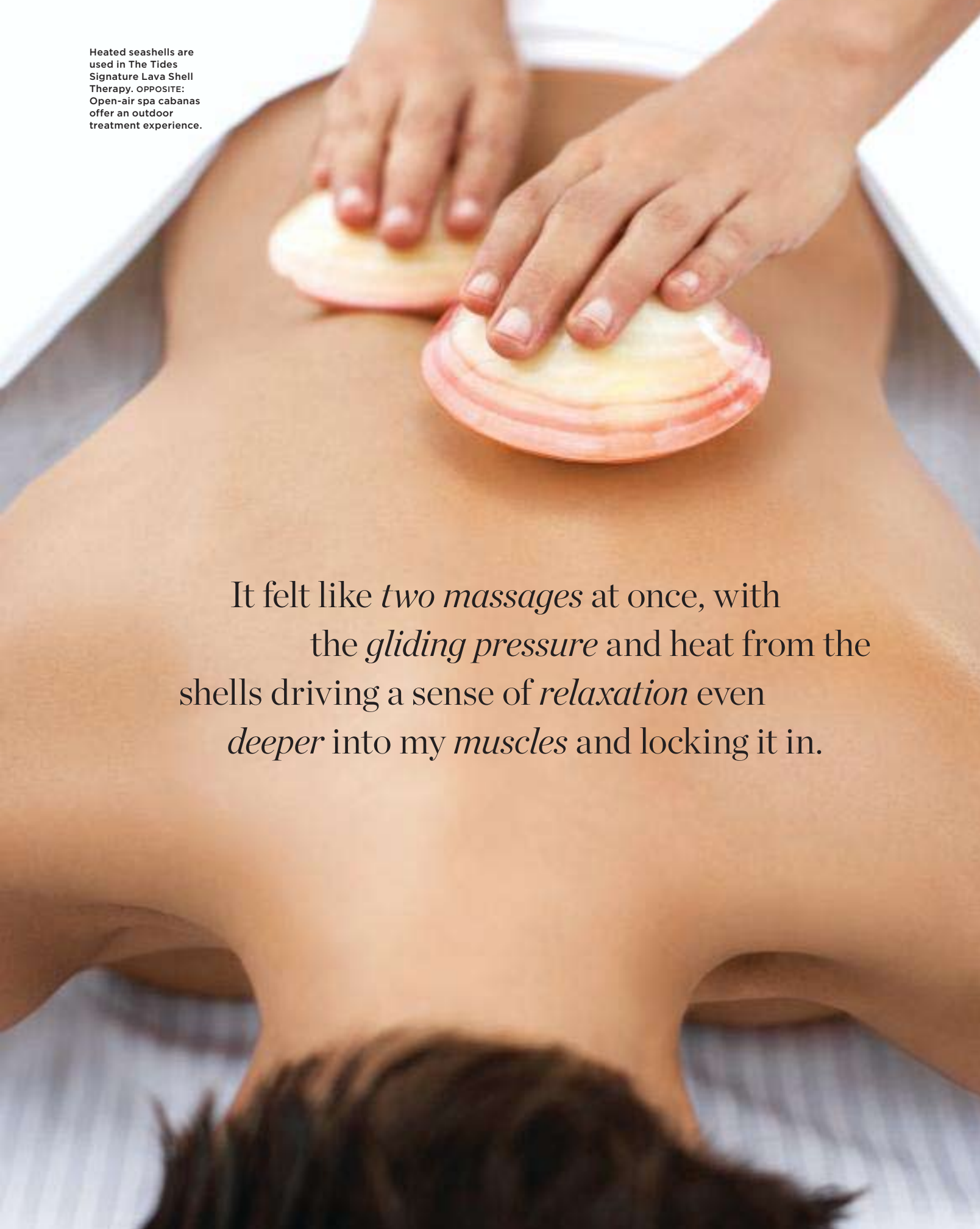


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Heated seashells are used in The Tides Signature Lava Shell Therapy. OPPOSITE: Open-air spa cabanas offer an outdoor treatment experience.

A close-up photograph of a person's back being massaged. Two hands are visible, each holding a large, smooth, pink and white seashell against the skin. The person is lying face down on a massage table, and their dark hair is visible at the bottom of the frame. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

It felt like *two massages* at once, with the *gliding pressure* and heat from the shells driving a sense of *relaxation* even *deeper* into my *muscles* and locking it in.



BOOK IT The Tides Zihuatanejo, The Tides Spa at Zihuatanejo, Zihuatanejo, Guerrero, Mexico, (866) 905-9560, tideszihuatanejo.com; doubles from \$355, 60-minute massage from \$95

The Tides Zihuatanejo hosts a variety of yoga retreats, which usually include accommodations, some meals, and yoga instruction. For upcoming dates, contact the resort.

Morley's relaxed, in-the-moment attitude was catching, and soon I found myself stopping to appreciate the details as I walked to and from the Yoga Pavilion. I watched attendants rake the sand into swirls resembling a zen rock garden several times a day. I saw them pick coconuts from the beach's palm trees. (One nudged the fruit from its stem, another caught it on a pillow.) I noticed them collect the eggs of endangered sea turtles and rebury them in a fenced area for safekeeping. And I observed other guests drift into the warm, clear water of the bay and laze on king-size swing beds hung from the rafters of open-air *palapas*.

The chance for daily indulgence at The Tides' first-class sanctuary proved irresistible. Although the retreat included one massage (either at the spa, on the beach, or in my room), I scheduled four services at the spa, each to follow morning yoga, a time when I thought I might appreciate

it most. Because the facility is relatively small—five treatment rooms around an inviting central lounge—spa director Karina Pacheco recommended reserving time before my arrival date. She paired me with Modesta, a therapist with wide, dark, doelike eyes and a sweet and attentive demeanor.

Before my first massage, Modesta asked how my first two yoga sessions were and how I was feeling. She then led me to a candlelit room filled with the faint sound of an Indian raga and the soft scent of jasmine and cloves. To my surprise and delight, she turned into a powerhouse of hands, forearms, and elbows. Afterward she explained she had drawn mostly from Swedish and sports massage techniques, kneading and stretching to lengthen the muscles in preparation for the continuing challenges of yoga. As my sessions with Modesta progressed she added more percussionlike movements as an antidote to the slight stiffness caused, no doubt, by my occasional failure to »95

An oceanfront yoga retreat is the perfect wellness escape. OPPOSITE: Guests of The Tides can relax on king-size swing beds on the beach.



Vacations, Yoga Style

In addition to The Tides' retreats, you can find similar getaways worldwide. Here's a sampling.

BHUTAN Tucked high in the Himalayan pine forests, **Uma Paro** offers weeklong packages that typically include accommodations, 21 hours of yoga and meditation instruction, along with breakfast and lunch, two dinners, and visits to Bhutanese tourist sites. *Uma Paro, Como Shambhala Retreat, Paro, Bhutan, +(975) 8271597, uma.paro.como.bz; singles from \$3,227 for six nights*

COSTA RICA **Pura Vida Spa** offers seven-night retreats at its mountaintop location near the Costa Rican capital of San Jose. Lodgings range from standard rooms with shared baths to luxury chalets, and healthy buffet meals, a spa treatment, yoga, and excursions are included. *Pura Vida Spa, Alajuela, Costa Rica, (888) 767-7375, rresorts.com; singles from \$1,525 for seven nights all inclusive*


DOMINICA A typical week's retreat package at **Jungle Bay Resort & Spa** includes an eco-friendly cottage under the forest canopy, gourmet breakfast and lunch, one massage at the seaside spa, and twice-daily yoga—plus activities like cooking classes and local tours. *Jungle Bay Resort & Spa, Spa du Soleil, Point Mulatre Bay, Dominica, (767) 446-1789, junglebaydominica.com; singles from \$2,110 for seven nights*

INDONESIA Retreats at **Como Shambhala Estate**, near the artists village of Ubud, are accompanied by exquisite furnishings, fine cuisine, ancient therapies, and the latest advances in holistic spa treatments. A package will often cover six nights' accommodations, some meals, and twice-daily yoga. *Como Shambhala Estate, Bali, Indonesia, +(62) 361978888, cse.como.bz; singles from \$3,135 for six nights*

JAMAICA Arranged by Inward Bound and led by visiting instructors, retreats at **Round Hill Hotel and Villas** typically include an immersion in yoga, morning and evening meals, and four nights' accommodations in a luxurious oceanfront room designed by Ralph Lauren. *Round Hill Hotel and Villas, The Spa at Round Hill, Montego Bay, Jamaica, (800) 972-2159, roundhilljamaica.com; singles from \$2,904 for four nights*

MEXICO Three-night retreats at **Mandarin Oriental Riviera Maya** feature luxury accommodations, twice-daily yoga, one spa treatment, healthy meals, and use of heat and water therapies. *Mandarin Oriental Riviera Maya, The Spa, Playa del Carmen, Quintana Roo, Mexico, (866) 585-8575, mandarinoriental.com/rivieramaya; singles from \$2,155 for three nights all inclusive*

TURKS AND CAICOS Esteemed teachers like Rodney Yee headline retreats at **Parrot Cay**, often six-night stays with more than four hours of daily practice, luxury accommodations, and meals. *Parrot Cay, Como Shambhala Retreat, Providenciales, Turks and Caicos, (877) 754-0726, parrotcay.como.bz; singles from \$6,617 for six nights all inclusive*

 If you can't get away, check out our yoga-at-home resources at spamagazine.com/yoga.

LIKE A DREAM

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story—taking my jumbled thoughts and concerns and articulating them eloquently. We talked about what nourishes me and what drains me, and she shared the 75/25 rule: I should only let the draining things have 25 percent of my time. An abhyanga is an Ayurvedic massage performed by two therapists. It started with the selection of a scent to balance my dosha, then the two therapists joined hands with me to connect our energies. They proceeded to give me a perfectly in-sync massage that astounded my senses.

ON MY LAST DAY, I NEEDED THE Morning Ritual more than on my first. After the smudging, Mary explained that Native American women's groups would gather to share worries, concerns, or gratitude, and I expressed my thanks to everyone for making my journey perfect. The Rites of Passage Journey—and really just the entire surroundings at Mii amo—provided me with an amazing environment to make that step to the next level in my personal journey. I felt like I was able to open up and be more real and relate better to others, which fulfilled my goal of improved communication. I was also able to inch forward in thinking of myself as beautiful even with the scars, and I was given the time to focus on myself and discover what is right for me.

Now that I'm back in my real life, it almost seems like a dream. After I returned to work, one person walked by my office and said, "I've never seen you look so serene.... I can't wait to hear what happened to you out there." I looked at her and said, "I'm not really sure I can explain it, but anyone who is facing a change or healing from something in their lives needs to find their way to Mii amo somehow, somehow." □

{ the source details on what's featured in this issue }

Cover Bernardo sandals, (800) 867-5054, bernardofootwear.com. **C.Z. Falconer** dress, (310) 567-6200, czfalconer.com. **Eco-Panda** swimsuit, eco-panda.com. **Zad** bracelet, (800) 477-2216, zadwholesalejewelry.com.

Like a Dream **PAGE 64** Beyond Yoga pants, iambeyond.com. **Spool No. 72** top, spoolno72.com.

com. **PAGE 67** Beyond Yoga pants, iambeyond.com. **Bumboo** shirt, bumboolife.com. **C.Z. Falconer** tank, (310) 567-6200, czfalconer.com. **PAGE 68** Beyond Yoga pants, iambeyond.com. **Spool No. 72** top and earrings, spoolno72.com. **PAGE 71** Beyond Yoga pants, iambeyond.com. **Bumboo** shirt, bumboolife.com. **C.Z. Falconer** tank, (310) 567-6200, czfalconer.com.

FINDING BALANCE

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heed my body's warning signals during certain poses. Her daily use of Osea's Passion Massage Oil (containing a heady combination of jasmine, neroli, artemisia, and clove bud mixed with a blend of nourishing oils) left my skin feeling 10 years younger, and each rubdown felt better than the one before—the final massage trumping them all.

This pinnacle spa treatment began with a red algae-infused All of Me Body Wrap, which produced a cooling effect under my warm sheet and blanket. After a hot shower came The Tides Signature Lava Shell Therapy, a massage performed with four polished seashells heated from the inside with small bags of minerals, kelp, algae, and saltwater. I can't tell you how those ingredients generated heat for the full hour or how Modesta was able to juggle the four palm-sized shells without dropping them. But I can tell you how it felt—like two massages at once, with the gliding pressure and heat from the shells driving a sense of relaxation even deeper into my muscles and locking it in.

BUT NOT EVEN the Lava Shell Therapy could match the relaxed state I achieved on my final morning of yoga. Somehow the depth of the stretches—combined with the sound of the waves, scent of the salty air, and repeated exhalations of my breath—intensified the relief that came at the end. I suddenly realized how sorely I'd missed my yoga practice.

Like every other class I've taken, Morley's last session ended in Corpse Pose (my favorite), followed by a brief offering of thoughts for contemplation. As I lay there enveloped in calm, I remembered a quote Morley gave us the first night of the retreat. It came from the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi, who said: "Your duty is to be, and not be this or that.... The ultimate truth is so simple; it is nothing more than being in one's natural state."

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I thought of this wisdom again when I arrived home. Even before unpacking, I let an impulse carry me through a series of asanas known as Sun Salutation. Still flush from the flow of poses, I vowed to sign up for classes with my favorite yoga teacher in town. I didn't want to lose this feeling again. □