

Yoga without the studio: Outdoors practice popular

by Sheila Mulrooney Eldred

(AP) On hilltops in Austin, Texas, under the full moon. On Montana dude ranches. In Minneapolis city parks. Yoga practitioners across the country are celebrating spring and summer by taking their downward-facing dog poses and sun salutations outdoors.

Many yoga studios are trying to take the “studio” out of it.

“Life just slows down and there are no mirrors or music to get in your way” outdoors, said **Sarah Longacre**, who runs Blooma, a pre- and post-natal yoga and wellness studio in Minneapolis. “You can get connected to a deeper place in yourself. You can feel—literally feel—the earth with your hands, feet and body.”

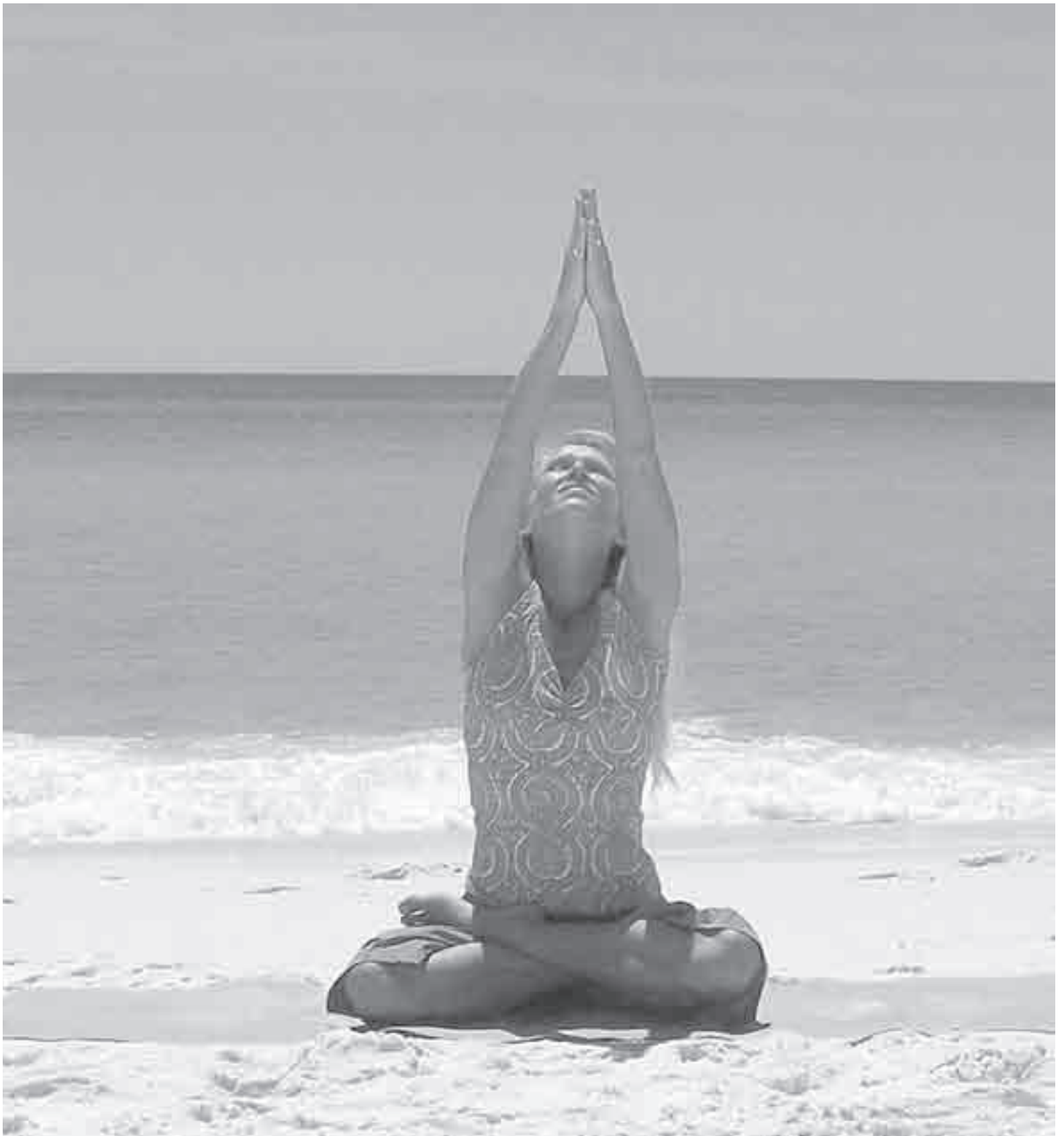
Perhaps because so much of yoga practice draws directly from nature (common poses are named for animals, trees, mountains and crescent moons), practitioners often say that doing yoga outside allows for deeper connections.

“Outside on the ground it’s easier to connect to yoga images,” said **Jennifer Gwin**, who leads yoga classes outside near Austin when the weather permits.

“The studio was wonderful,” concurred **Margaret Burns Vap**, who in 2007 left the Washington, D.C., yoga studio she founded and moved to Montana, where she started leading yoga retreats on a ranch. “But the combination of yoga and outdoor activity on retreat, along with a longer period of time to spend with students, has multiplied the joy of teaching at least 10 times.”

Vap’s Big Sky Yoga Retreats offer programs in yoga and skiing, yoga and hiking, and one for women called “Cowgirl Yoga and Horseback Riding.” Vap emphasizes the physical connection between yoga and that day’s activity.

“But it’s the emotional and spiritual openness resulting from yoga that can cause someone to burst into tears—usually happy



ones—on the hiking trail or in the saddle,” she said. “Yoga moves things, getting rid of stuff that isn’t serving us and making room for new inspirations.”

Other benefits are more practical: Many outdoor classes are free, for example.

At Houston’s Discovery Green park, dozens of participants stretch out for free yoga classes on Saturday mornings. In New York City, a health club offers free rooftop classes overlooking the Hudson River.

And in Austin, people have met at a scenic overlook every full moon for 14 years for a free session.

Gwin met her husband at a free sunrise class on the riverbank there.

In Tucson, Ariz., when yoga teacher **Bonnie Golden**’s budget was cut for a workshop series for a large organization, she moved the classes to her backyard patio. It worked perfectly, she says: The desert flowers became meditative objects, and the blue sky provided a beautiful backdrop.

“And now, I practice outdoors quite often,” she said.

In fact, outdoor yoga is about as minimalist a fitness activity as you can get: no mat, shoes or other gear required.

The State of Vermont is banking on practical benefits as well: “Park Bench Yoga” posters adorn highway rest areas as part of a joint venture by the state’s Information Centers Division, Governor’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, and Governor’s Highway Safety Program. The goal is to reduce driver fatigue, eye strain and lower back stiffness that can lead to accidents.

plans to publish a feature in August about taking yoga outside for self-practice, said **Andrea Ferretti**, the magazine’s deputy editor. Essentially, any grassy or sandy spot will do: You

can practice in the backyard, midway through a walk or hike, or on a camping trip.

Of course, there are drawbacks: January in Minnesota, for example. Bugs. Hot sun. Rain. Sometimes, yoga can help lessen those annoyances, Vap said.

“You can see this shift when people are faced with the challenges of a hike—altitude, fatigue, not-so-good weather,” she said. “Instead of panicking or resisting, they are in a better place to meet these challenges and move through them with a feeling of accomplishment.”