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## Yoga's rock stars

**L.A.'s top yogis have lifestyles that rival their celebrity clients'.**

By Jenny Hontz

Special to The Times

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SHIVA REA, the reigning queen of L.A.'s saturated yoga scene, strikes a pose for Yogi Times photographer Jasper Johal.

"Scoot back a little so that light catches your face," directs Johal, whose photo will grace a "Pose for a Cause" centerfold promoting the international charity Trees for the Future. "Beautiful, nice. Got it."

### FOR THE RECORD:

Celebrity yogis: A caption accompanying a Monday Health article about celebrity yogis misspelled the name of Shiva Rea as Shiva Rae. The caption also said that she was donating proceeds from one of her workshops to charity. In fact, she is donating money from multiple workshops. Also, a photo by Los Angeles Times staffer Karen Tapia-Andersen with an article in the Aug. 21 Health section about L.A.'s top yoga practitioners should have made it clear that yogi Duncan Wong was posing for Yogi Times photographer Jasper Johal.—

Fellow yogi Duncan Wong and a group of DVD promoters cheer on Rea, just out of view of the snapping lens, as a glam-style fan lifts wisps of her long golden hair.

"This brings up my inner rock star," Rea jokes.

It's an offhand remark, but the truth in her statement is impossible to miss. The L.A. studio has the distinct look and feel of a celebrity fashion shoot.

Although Rea, 39, and other A-list yogis may begin their mornings with ancient Indian meditation and tongue-scraping rituals, their days are frequently filled with more contemporary marketing duties. Such is the odd, new balancing act of today's top yogis, many of whom have been teaching for 20-plus years and are now confronting international fame.

Riding a wave of unprecedented yoga mania — fueled in part by star practitioners such as Madonna — modern yogis' lives, especially in Los Angeles, increasingly resemble those of the celebrities they often teach.

Practitioners such as Rea, Bryan Kest, Sean Corne, Gurmukh Kaur Khalsa, Ana Forrest and Rodney Yee are the Nikes, Coca-Colas or, perhaps, Whole Foods, of the yoga world. Their brand names sell clothing lines, DVDs and pricey international retreats, as well as various causes.

"It's a wild thing," says Kest, 41, founder of Santa Monica Power Yoga, whose classes frequently draw nearly 200 people, some squeezing into the studio's bathroom, placing their mats next to the toilets.

His schedule is booked through 2011, and his yogi buddies spend so much time on the road, they have no need for a home. "It's a total rock star life," he says. "They're picked up at the airport, taken to a hotel and then off to the yoga studio, where 150 people all pay a lot of money to see them. It's like a concert."

In fact, all but the wealthy are priced out of the most exclusive yoga vacations. Maty Ezraty and Chuck Miller, the former owners of Yoga Works, are hosting weeklong retreats, costing \$8,000 to \$12,000, at the Tuscany villa of Sting and his wife, Trudie Styler, in September and October.

Regardless of price, the most popular yogis have students who never miss a venue, like fans who trailed the Grateful Dead.

"I do have people who follow me around," said Forrest, 49, founder of Forrest Yoga Institute in Santa Monica. "They are my student base, not 'groupies.' That word implies mindless idiots."

Though some teachers bristle at the mention of their celebrity status, others cultivate and embrace it.

Wong, 38, a former street tough who sports a nose ring and gangster tattoos alongside the Buddha eye on his arm, talks with the bravado of a rap star — all in the name of enlightenment.

"I'm into name, game, claim and fame," said the Asia-based master of yoga-martial arts fusion. "I'm going for the world, no mistake about that, but not for oneself alone. It's for others. The key is service."

He recently opened studios in Shanghai and Tokyo, released a DVD and will soon launch a high-end clothing line with designer Yohji Yamamoto.

"It's large. It's very high art, the art of living the high life, jet setting and castles," he said of his time teaching and traveling with Madonna.

In this era of insatiable celebrity obsession, it seems anything stars do and anyone they touch also become famous. Yogis are no exception, and Los Angeles is the nexus of the two.

As they live it up, though, some teachers wonder whether yoga has become so commercial — and so popular among the elite — that it has lost its soul.

"There's irony in it," said Ezraty, 43, who sold Yoga Works in a multimillion-dollar deal three years ago, in part because she was tired of pulling great teachers from the schedule who couldn't fill classes.

"They wouldn't play the game, wouldn't dress right" or play music, she said. "I couldn't take it anymore. Yoga is not about publicity, the clothes, where you live. It's about being content with yourself."

Ezraty believes the concept of celebrity teachers contradicts yoga's key principle of "union" among all living beings. "It's challenging for yoga teachers to keep their cool and not let it get to their heads."

But perspective is certainly possible. When it comes to yoga superstars, Rea is the ubiquitous lean-bodied goddess du jour. Gracing the cover of June's Yoga Journal magazine, she has her own yoga clothing line called Shiva Shakti and several of the bestselling yoga DVDs on the market. Rea's image and writings also fill the pages of yoga photography books and calendars.

Her life is a whirlwind of teaching, surfing and nonstop travel. She visits up to 35 countries a year leading workshops, training new yoga teachers and heading retreats in exotic locales such as Costa Rica, India and the Greek island of Santorini — usually with her husband, James Bailey, an ayurvedic medical practitioner, and 7-year-old son, Jai, at her side.

Rea acknowledges the challenges involved in maintaining inner peace with such a hyper-scheduled life. But she's found a happy balance — if you don't count her occasionally messy kitchen and forgotten birthdays.

"Our life is so unusual," Rea said. When things started to take off a few years ago, "it was pretty chaotic. It overwhelmed me. But then I learned how to create a rhythm with that. You learn to actually be happy in the middle of the chaos."

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### **Time to meditate**

Different yogis find their own ways to stay sane and true to the principles they teach, which include life balance and well-being, compassion, wisdom, joy and, ultimately, spiritual enlightenment.

For Rea, it means getting back to nature and sacred rituals. She gets up at 5:30 a.m. to meditate and practice yoga at her home in the Pacific Palisades. The light-filled town house is decorated with Hindu altars, ethnic prints from Thailand and a Singapore hula hoop resembling a gigantic set of Buddhist prayer beads.

She surfs every day when she's in town, sometimes stretching into yoga poses on her board. She also cooks her own vegetarian food, bringing a mini-stove with her on the road.

"I think everybody has to decide whether to let the modern world run your life or be in another type of relationship, living with a current as powerful as the digital age," she said.

Rea's life includes help from a personal assistant to scan her 150 e-mails a day, coordinate travel bookings and schedule private lessons with stars such as Pierce Brosnan. It also includes signing magazines and DVDs for fans at yoga conferences.

At home, she is adored by her students — and seems to adore them. "We have three pregnant goddesses in the house," she announced during a recent class at Exhale Center for Sacred Movement in Venice. Miked up with a headset on stage like a pop star, she hung out afterward, chatting and hugging people for nearly an hour.

"That was an amazing class," gushed student Rita Kaperonis. "I wish it was on DVD."

Rea welcomes such appreciation but seems uncomfortable with the tendency of some students to put teachers on a pedestal. "We're really not about that at all," she said.

Kest is also bemused by all the current hero-worshipping of yogis.

Despite the adulation, "most of the people I know are pretty humble dudes," he said. "They've been doing it 20 to 30 years and are basically benefiting from all the stars lining up."

Although he frequently gets recognized on the street, yogis aren't hounded by paparazzi, he said. "The difference is an actor will get stopped by everybody," he added. "As popular as yoga is, it's still a small percentage of the world."

It's a percentage that continues to grow, though. As we walk past his studio at the corner of 2nd Street and Santa Monica Boulevard, Kest points out four successful businesses where students practice yoga, all on a single corner.

When he started teaching 20 years ago, there were only three studios in Los Angeles; now there are more than 200. "It's like monsoon frogs leaping up out of nowhere. I attribute it to one thing, aside from charisma. What we're doing is making people feel so good."

So good, in fact, that many successful and powerful students, even movie stars, check their egos at the studio door and worship their yogis. Such adoration has a downside, though.

"You never get invited to a party again because now you're their icon of pure," Wong said. "It doesn't matter what you say. You represent God, in a way. You are their gatekeeper to salvation in their mind. You can never take the yoga hat off, once you put it on."

But yogis party too, Wong said. "My promotion people say, 'Dude, don't drink or smoke in public, don't dance on the tables. You have to be more cautious, like a public figure. You have to keep it behind closed doors.' "

Of course, many yogis do live pretty clean lives. Forrest turned to yoga years ago to rid herself of an addiction to drugs, alcohol and tobacco, which she never touches now. She often rises at 2:30 a.m. to practice yoga in her Orcas Island dome home. When she and Rea are in the same town, they sometimes practice together.

Still, if your image of a yoga teacher is someone who "dresses in pastels and speaks softly, that sure isn't me," Forrest said. "I'm a healer, but a lot of times my healing is like lancing a wound."

Forrest likes to zoom around on her V-Max 1200 motorcycle, and her publicist describes her as a cross between Cher and Xena the Warrior Princess.

"I love my bike," she said. "I spent a number of years taking a ... vow of poverty. I'm glad I'm not there anymore and can afford my motorcycle. Having lived in poverty, I much prefer having money."

Forrest also curses like a sailor. "I speak and express myself with profanity all the time. It's useful as a wake-up: Stop building your holier-than-thou stories about me. I'm not going to be part of perpetuating a fantasy."

Forrest hopes people respect the beauty and purity of the teachings, while realizing yogis are flawed like everyone else. "I have headaches and bad days. I can be a bitch."

The truth is, contemporary yogis lead their active lives with the help of assistants and business managers. "I have corporations," Forrest said. "I find that amusing."

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### **Supporting causes**

Still, yogis don't tend to focus on the bottom line as much as typical CEOs. Instead, they more closely resemble celebrities lending their names to various causes, often dedicating themselves to helping those less fortunate.

Forrest will receive a commendation in September from L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa for creating Yoga in the Hood to help impoverished families in South Central. She requires all the teachers she trains in Los Angeles to volunteer there, teaching yoga to kids and adults at a community center called A Place Called Home.

Rea, who was named after the Hindu Lord of the Dance, Shiva, is donating all the proceeds from her Yoga Trance Dance Workshops to the charity Trees of the Future until more than a million trees are planted in the world. She also volunteers teaching yoga at her son's charter school once a week and drives an eco-friendly Prius, which is more fuel-efficient than most cars.

Kest, whose classes are donation only, drives a hybrid Honda Accord and donates all proceeds from two of his 14 classes a week to the charities, A Place Called Home, Para Los Niños and the California Wildlife Center

Of course, top yoga teachers lead rather rarefied lives and can, therefore, afford to give back. The image of

a yogic lifestyle once brought to mind communal ashrams. Today, many live in homes with gorgeous views in Pacific Palisades, Topanga Canyon and Hawaii.

"It really is a decent living," Kest says. "We'll never make as much as a good actor, but we won't struggle as much as a struggling actor."

The standard yoga teacher earns \$4 per student in a class. But at larger studios, such as Yoga Works, they make \$7 per student or more, Kest said. "If there are 80 people in a class, that's \$600 a class. If you teach two classes a day, that's \$1,200 a day, \$6,000 to \$7,000 a week, \$250,000 to \$300,000 a year for working three hours a day."

At a weekend workshop on the road, a teacher can pull in \$6,000, and yogis who own their own studios might make millions.

"It is so crazy," Kest said. "The original owners of Yoga Works just sold out for millions and moved to Hawaii. They were bought by Internet millionaires."

Wong expects he'll be next. "I will be a millionaire in this lifetime. It's absolute destiny for me to become a super-famous yoga teacher when I'm older. The necessary rise of my fame and power has been prophesied early on by my gurus."

Prophesied or not, only a handful of yogis become superstars, and those who do rarely lead a lavish existence on par with showbiz celebs. They have nice homes, but they aren't palatial mansions. They stay at the Marriott more often than the Ritz.

"To have a halfway decent house in L.A. and to buy organic foods, you've got to pull in \$150,000 a year," Kest said. "It's not like we're really rich people, but we're doing well."

At her recent Yogi Times photo shoot, Rea did her own makeup and hair. She also cooked a potful of organic *kitcheri*, a vegetarian dish, for everyone on the set.

"Yogis don't want to be too much into image," said Renee Field, manager of sales and marketing for Acacia, which has produced DVDs featuring Rea and Wong. "Shiva [Rea] is especially humble."

Rea never invites herself anywhere and doesn't hire a publicist because she says her life path should evolve organically and that success stems from sincerity. That philosophy is clearly working for her.

"I personally never do anything for money," she said.

"I never knew I'd be able to have a livelihood from yoga. At the beginning, I was practicing yoga when one to two people were in the room and people would cock their eye at you when you said you were a yoga teacher. It was almost like saying, 'I'm a stripper.' "

All the attention yogis are getting is nice, she said, but added that, having lived in Africa and spent time in India, she doesn't get caught up in the fluff. "Once you live in traditional cultures and look at the vast desert sky, being on the cover of a magazine is wonderful, but I don't identify with it."

Even Wong agrees that money and fame pale next to spiritual bliss.

"I'm an ambitious person," he said, "but all ambition, all ego, all desire just melt away in the presence of a true, awakened master. Your only desire is to weep at the feet of the guru."

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