

# Winter Newsletter

December 2008

## Winter Newsletter and Travel Stories from Brazil

*Dearest Community,*

*I am writing this message to you from the most beautiful, pristine place, deep in the tropics of Brazil. My first visit here was 20 years ago and, amazingly, some things are still the same. Of course, many things have changed as well.*

*Going down memory lane has been a sweet experience colored with a tinge of melancholy. I have reconnected with a side of me that I had almost forgotten. Brazil is in my blood and my soul. Easily, I slipped back into the rhythm of this country.*

*The timing of this trip has been blessed by the order of the cosmos, including my encounter with old friends and dear teachers, Sharon and David from Jivamukti, who just happened to visit for a few days. We spent an afternoon together that never could have been planned in advance. But there we were, in the same place at the same time. Go figure!*

*Being in a place that is both familiar, but also, strange to the life I now live in the Bay Area has taught me much, particularly through interactions with the people, the animals and the land. Most strikingly and consistently, I have been faced with the pairs of opposites that the universe constantly presents to us, in order that we may glean whatever lessons we can from these moments of precious time.*

*I would like to share with you some highlights from this trip:*

I spent one week in Canoa Quebrada, a little village on the beach near Fortaleza. In Canoa Quebrada, a timeless and stark place of the north, the warm wind rules and the sand is as white as the snow in Switzerland. At a certain time of day, the surrounds are bathed in the warmest of golden hues and, generally, the colors all around are so deep and beautiful, it almost hurts!

The warm sea stretches endlessly, with bright turquoise waves that meld into dark grey. At a point in the distance, it seems as though the sea merges into the stunning blue of the sky.

Most everyone who lives here ends up walking a few miles a day just to get back and forth. You really can't go anywhere in a hurry this way. Time is measured by the rustling of the palm trees instead of by the clock.

There is an interesting greeting custom here, initially amusing but perfectly sensible. In Switzerland, the customary greeting is three kisses on the cheek. In the States, it is a hug. But here, you literally take a sniff of the person you are meeting! The people who live here say hello and then proceed to take a little sniff off the side of your neck. It is hilarious, but also makes perfect sense, as you can verify with your nose how a person is really doing.

The opposites are alive and well here. On a drive from Fortaleza my friend Maciria and I saw five men, completely inebriated, swaggering along the side of the road, occasionally stumbling into it -- a road upon which Maciria drove a staggering 160 kilometers an hour. Evidently, driving at a reasonable speed is not the custom in this part of Brazil.

Along these same roads, I saw donkeys behaving more like dogs, foraging through garbage and crossing the road whenever they felt inclined to do so.

I met Antoine, a retired fashion photographer from Paris who has been living here for the last 15 years. He shared with me the following joke based in Ceara, a poor state in the north of Brazil:

An old couple came into a restaurant and sat down. The waiter came over and asked the man what they wanted and the man ordered a cold guarana antartica (a popular and common drink in Brazil). Then he asked the waiter to bring another cup, claiming that he shares everything with his wife. So the waiter did. A moment later, the man ordered a sandwich and again asked for an extra plate because he shares everything with his wife. Then he began to eat. Soon he finished and the waiter noticed that the wife had not touched a thing, so he went over to comment to the man. But before he got very far, the wife showed her toothless grin and said, "Please, everything is okay, I'm just waiting for him to finish so he can give me the dentures!"

There are a few "nightclubs" in town. They are right next to each other and at night there appears to be a competition to see which venue can play the loudest music.

There is a reggae club, a lambada club, and, to my astonishment, there is a Swiss club, whatever that means!

Remarkably, there is no cover charge and there is no pressure to drink. Dancing and having a good time are the focus of these places and the people who are their patrons. This scene is an example of the thriving local culture, the people who participate in it, and how they actively work to keep things as they are. Apparently, a few years ago a foreigner had the audacity to open an expensive nightclub with a cover charge. He closed six months later because EVERYONE boycotted him. I laughed when I heard this story – in some ways the power of the people is strong in Brazil.

While spending time in this village, pretty much outside of the “real world,” there was much less need for structure. Everything flowed in a natural way, eliminating the tendency to create an imposing framework to manage the time.

There is a continuous harmony in Canoa Quebrada that everyone taps into pretty quickly. People move according to the water, the moon, the wind and the sun. Even the restaurants are affected by this natural order. They open their doors in accordance with the ebb and flow of the tides. Being held in this universal harmony creates peace in the system. The need or inclination to control, which most of us know so well, dissipates.

## **Rio de Janeiro and Petropolis**

Petropolis is a little city up in the mountains and serves as a popular weekend escape for the cariocas, Rio’s locals.

On the way out of Rio we came across miles and miles of favelas. The stench emanating from these slums was unbearable. Throughout this journey, however, I intentionally chose to witness the misery, keeping awareness that the human mind tends to tune out pretty quickly when confronted with that much discomfort.

In Petropolis, I was introduced to a community-based educational facility for children and adolescents from the slums. Being careful not to affiliate with any political groups, which would mean closure as soon as the next party takes over, they have been successfully operating for three years. Although Fundacao Educandario Princesa Isabel do Juizado da Infancia e da Juventude da Comarca de Petropolis is a well-funded project, the dedicated coordinators are overworked. I was able to contribute to the community by teaching a yoga class for the staff and a couple of the children.

In addition to the usual magic that happens in leading a group through yoga practice, including the gift of immense gratitude that I receive in return, I discovered that, indeed, I could teach a class in Portuguese!

Apparently, I hit the nerve while talking about the potential burnout of social workers and change makers. This is exactly where these dedicated souls were at that very moment. Introducing a method of self-care vis-à-vis a spiritual practice made a lot of sense to them. Jorge, the leader of this foundation and his cousin Flavio, a student in San Francisco, said that nobody who he had encountered taught yoga as a simple and spiritual practice. Yoga seems to be perceived as a pastime for the Brazilian elite, similar to what is happening in the States. There was great satisfaction for me to provide a practice that showed these people the simplicity and profundity of opening one's heart through yoga, in all of its accessibility.

### **Paraty and Sao Paulo – Hometown of Mauricio's family**

Another excursion brought us to Trindade, a hippie village resting on some of the most extraordinary beaches I have ever seen, including a pristine shoreline with lagoons nestled against the remaining seven percent of coastal rainforest. One adventure took us to a natural pool with enormous stones, seemingly cast randomly by a playful giant.

To reach this wonderland, we trekked through treacherous rainforest paths before finally arriving at our Edenesque destination. The water was crystal clear, revealing an abundance of sea creatures. Several hours were spent snorkeling and exploring, watching sea stars and turtles swim below me in the beautiful waters. It was truly exceptional.

Next stop was Sao Paulo. There, I led a workshop for a group of wonderful people, speaking in Portuguese the entire time!

On the last day, Francesca, a student and friend from San Francisco and I were invited to dinner by Fabio. Fabio happened to be a friend and partner of Rogerio Fasano, restaurateur, hotel owner and, perhaps, the wealthiest man in Brazil. Had I known we were going to be regally wined and dined, I would have dressed accordingly! Again, the paradox caught up with us – from the poorest to the wealthiest in an instant!

This is what yoga is all about – living the paradox.

I have so much gratitude for having had the opportunity to connect with this part of the world again and to be able to bring yoga to all kinds of Brazilians, the wealthy, the poor and everyone in between. This is the work that needs to be done, regardless of class, gender, race, or economic status. I am also grateful for the remembrance that I thrive in teaching yoga to the peoples of the world.