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Holistic Health



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Mermaid Yoga: Making Waves on Cape Cod

by Diane Kovanda

"You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment"

Henry David Thoreau

To practice Yoga authentically is to be fully present and mindful of the moment, moving skillfully with the flow of life. Danielle Veseskis and Hannah Vigliano are sharing their love of yoga by taking it into the water. They are creating an aquatic body/mind fitness program and making healthy waves on Cape Cod.

The two young and innovative yoga teachers are putting a gentle and graceful spin on yoga by teaching the practice to their students immersed a warm salt water swimming pool.

The practice of yoga poses, posture flows, balancing postures, breathing, relaxation and meditation in the water provides a completely new experience and fresh perspective. Water has a myriad of therapeutic qualities – creating flotation, resistance and ease. Water is a natural and serene environment for practicing yoga.



One feels supported and nurtured while practicing in the water. Water is also the ideal medium for conditioning and training. The hydrostatic (passive) and hydrodynamic (active) properties of water provide optimal conditions for safe and effective yoga practice.

"I love the mindfulness and spirituality of yoga. I want to be doing yoga all my life." Hannah seems so much wiser than her 23 years. *"May I be Free"* in beautiful script is tattooed on her right forearm. It is an excerpt from Metta, an ancient loving-kindness meditation.



Hannah's demeanor is definitely kind, in an unassuming and genuine way. She started doing yoga with her mom a few years ago, and, encouraged by mom, she became a certified yoga teacher. Danielle, 27, works at Complete Wellness, a medical office in Cotuit. She started doing yoga a few years ago, beginning with meditation to help with anxiety. "I saw how practicing meditation benefited me and I want to share it with other people. It stops the mind chatter, reduces stress and brings me to a calmer place."

Danielle and Hannah are also unique in the way they partner to teach yoga together. They collaborate on creating the flow of classes and often you can find one in the water with the students, describing the practice, and the other standing at the edge of the pool, demonstrating the yoga poses.

The students do not need to know how to swim, and no headstands are practiced. All the poses are done with the head above water. Together, Hannah and Danielle create a safe atmosphere for students to explore their range of movement.

I joined them in the warm salt water pool at the Mashpee Fitness Center. After warming up with a brisk walk around the shallow end of the sparkly and pristine pool, we stretched and strengthened with every standing pose – just like on land.



The balancing poses were such a great experience – on the one hand I felt supported by the water, on the other hand I still was developing focus, strength, and balance.

There was also a gentle current in the pool which could easily sway you to one side – so core/abdominal engagement was extremely helpful. The edge of the pool was a great help to some who needed stability.



Danielle and Hannah provided floats to everyone for poses such as "upward boat" which looks like a "V" and "cobra" a very fun back bend using the floaties as you push your arms down into the water. Savasana – the relaxation pose at the end of a yoga practice was absolute bliss floating in water.

Margy McEnaney, the project director at Mashpee Fitness Center, encouraged Hannah and Danielle to take their regular yoga class from "on land" to the pool. "People who might normally shy away from a regular yoga class find themselves enjoying the benefits of yoga in the water. People see the class in the pool doing yoga and think: "I can do that!"

People of all abilities come to the water yoga class – from the very flexible to folks recovering from past injuries who feel better in the water. "More men are also venturing into the water yoga class – there is probably more of a comfort and ease for them in the water."

Joe Carroll, Doctor of Physical Therapy and co-owner of Cape Cod Rehab with his wife, Kathy, has been more than supportive of the program Danielle and Hannah launched in his pool. He states: "The beauty of working out in the water is it's three-fold power. Move slowly and the water will assist to aid flexibility, the buoyancy will allow relaxation and by moving faster it offers resistance to aid in strengthening."

Joe works with people from all walks of life – from athletes reaching for their peak performance to people rehabilitating from various injuries. "The water yoga program is allowing my patients with orthopedic injuries who love traditional yoga, but aren't quite ready to tolerate the weight bearing positions, to exercise in a pain-free environment."

Up to 60% of the human adult body is water. This may be one of the reasons some people thrive in watery environments. I try to visit the beach each day – winter or summer – to get my healing dose of sea. "Beach yoga", and "in the ocean" or "pool yoga" – all of it attracts a

certain kind of person who enjoys the healing aspects of water.

My friend Christen Dexter, who spent many years swimming with her college swim team, calls this form of yoga in the water 'Mermaid Yoga'. We just feel better immersed in water. Quoting Isak Dinesen: "The cure for anything is salt water - tears, sweat, or the sea."

For many years the public has perceived Yoga as best suited for folks who want to work up a sweat on a Yoga mat and then contemplate their navel for a while. Fortunately, Yoga has been escaping the confines of this very narrow viewpoint in recent years. It has exploded in popularity, due to its myriad of therapeutic benefits.

Danielle and Hannah share their passion in a new and creative way. They are making Yoga accessible and fun in a form that gently invites even more folks to experience the powerful health giving aspects of Yoga that can be truly valuable for anyone who practices it. Hopefully they will continue making splashes for many years to come.

All photographs courtesy of Diane Kovanda

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