

Lifestyle

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The world is their yoga studio

Yoga students find peace, presence of mind by practicing outside



Kin Man Hui, Staff / San Antonio Express-News

Mobile Om founder Cassandra Fauss leads a yoga class on the Hays Street Bridge on Friday, Oct. 10, 2014. "We believe that the most sacred space for yoga is not found inside any studio, temple or ashram, but instead, it is the space that is created within," she said. Fauss teaches yoga twice a week on the bridge. (Kin Man Hui/San Antonio Express-News)

By Jessica Belasco

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SAN ANTONIO — They came in search of inner peace. Never mind the freight train that rumbled under them, shaking the steel of the Hays Street Bridge. Or a pair of cyclists who stared in curiosity as they pedaled by. Or the car alarm blaring a few yards away.

The distractions are par for the course at the twice-weekly yoga class in the middle of the East Side pedestrian bridge. In fact, instructor Cassandra Fauss embraces them.

“For me, it’s easy to find zen in a peaceful place, if you’re in a serene studio with music playing in the background and incense burning,” she said.

But finding peace and presence of mind in the midst of freeway noise and noisy teenagers on bikes?

“Then it’s easier to access that in your daily life when your boss is stressed out or you’re dealing with your kids,” she said. “It gives you more practical tools.”



Fauss is one of several yoga instructors leaving the studio and heading into parks and other outdoor venues. They’re trading climate-controlled air for humidity or cool breezes, Buddha sculptures and prayer flags for grass or rocks.

The Hays Street Bridge isn’t the only nontraditional location Fauss visits with her mobile yoga studio, Mobile Om. Students bend into downward dog outside coffee shops and restaurants, as well as on the top level of the parking garage at 1221 Broadway, which, like the bridge, provides a great view of downtown.

“I like to show places in the city that may go unappreciated,” she said.

Other instructors prefer more natural areas. Monica Walker likes holding classes along the San Antonio River. She regularly leads students from Heeling Sole on Nacogdoches Road in a walking meditation, making their way to the Robber Baron Cave. They call it “walkabout yoga.”

“Yoga means union,” Walker said. “Union with nature is a big thing. If you go into studios, they have nature sounds and things like that. A lot of times they’re trying to simulate nature, what’s outside. So why not take it outside?”

Walker said people tend to relax in natural places, which helps their breathing as they bend and flex and stretch.

“Being outside seems to amplify your experience of yoga,” Walker said.

“It changes the routine of always just being in a classroom. And it kind of opens you up to different awareness, which is what yoga is. When you take everybody off of the beaten path, it really helps them connect with themselves a lot better.”

Outdoor exercise seems to be having a moment. Fitness in the Park, a San Antonio Parks and Recreation program launched in 2012 to offer free exercise classes to the community, has grown tremendously.

This fiscal year, the department saw 43,000 people attend its classes, up from 23,000 the previous year, said Michael Baldwin, assistant parks and recreation manager. Offerings went from 2,500 last year to 4,500 this year.

The schedule includes boot camps, circuit training, Zumba and, of course, yoga.

“I really think people enjoy working out in a nature setting as opposed to in a stuffy gym,” Baldwin said. “The free aspect doesn’t hurt either. We’re also finding that many of our participants are connecting socially with others in the program, which has several benefits. We try our best to ensure that the quality of the classes is the same that you would get at any gym that charges a membership or fee.”

Outdoor yoga means taking the good with the bad. Along with fresh air may come mosquitoes. Summer classes can get seriously hot. Sometimes people huddle along the railings of the Hays Street Bridge to smoke pot.

When a wind blew across the bridge during a recent class, students balanced in warrior pose grabbed at their flapping mats and for water bottles that threatened to roll off the edge.

“Allow life to be chaotic for a moment and see how hard it is to resist focusing and fiddling,” Fauss told them.

“Unless it’s your keys or your money.”

Sabrina Levinson, 24, was exhilarated after her first class on the Hays Street Bridge.

“It’s such a beautiful view,” she said. “It was easy to let everything go.”

Later, Fauss reflected on the challenges an outdoor space can present to some student accustomed to a more controlled environment.

“When you’re outdoors, it’s dirty,” she said. “Your mat is going to get dirty. Your feet are going to get dirty. You have to go with it, because life’s dirty.”

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Where to find outdoor yoga

Mobile Om: mobileomtx.com, 210-816-0936

Walkabout yoga at Heeling Sole: heelingsole.com/yoga.html 210-560-1992

Monica Walker: [facebook.com/Yogionabikewithamat](https://www.facebook.com/Yogionabikewithamat)

Fitness in the Park: www.sanantonio.gov/

[parksandrec](#), and click on “fitness in the parks,” 210-207-8480



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