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November 2, 2020

**LIVE GENTLE
KRIPALU YOGA
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...again now, the teacher repeated a few times with an up and down inflection in her voice. I had no idea what the words meant, but I looked at the woman on my left and imitated her.

"Inhale and sit tall. Exhale, stay," the teacher continued in halting English. She counted five breaths, first in Thai, then in English. Mosquitos buzzed in my ears as we stood in Warrior I, and the sweat began to drip down the sides of my body in the early-evening heat.

Thai is not an easy language. Midway through my three-week trip to Thailand, I still couldn't remember or pronounce the simplest words or phrases, like "thank you." I understood almost none of the instructions being given in this makeshift open-air yoga studio in someone's front yard, a few feet from the main road and across the street from our hotel in the Klong Muang area of Krabi province. The mixed-level group included a fit Barcelonian woman in her twenties, four Thai women upwards of 60 or maybe even 70, my 16-year-old daughter, and me.

This wasn't my first time attending a yoga class in a foreign country; over the past decade, I'd become quite adept at blending in—with the Greeks at NYSY studio in Athens, the Berliners at Spirit Yoga in the city center, and the Swiss French in a small studio nestled in Lausanne's crooked streets. Undoubtedly, the class in Germany was the most alien. Since all I know how to say in German are the phrases *ich liebe dich* ("I love you") and *entschuldigen* ("excuse me"), I didn't even try to understand. It was an intense vinyasa flow and I had no choice but to let go. As a certified yoga instructor, I'm well versed in the poses, but that doesn't change the foreign factor, the inability to understand alignment cues and nuances in the instruction.

When traveling abroad, one of the first items I pack—after underwear and toothbrush—is my thin, lightweight, purple mat, which thankfully doesn't affect how many pairs of shoes I can bring. The first time I brought my mat along was on a one-week trip to Jamaica with my husband, a belated 20th-anniversary celebration. Since we were staying in a small bed and breakfast on the outskirts of less touristy Port Antonio, I doubted that I'd be attending a class. On our first morning, I unrolled my mat on our balcony and turned my chest and my gaze toward the sky in Side Angle, and then outward toward the

November 6, 2020

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Practicing alone in a foreign country, surrounded by newness and with the desire to explore, is one thing. Going to a group class in a foreign country, in a different language, is another. What I've learned in my travels is that language is—or becomes—secondary. While it helps to understand the basics of Downward-Facing Dog or the components of a Sun Salutation, it's not crucial. What really counts is a willingness to step outside your comfort zone, to introduce yourself to the teacher and the yogis on either side of you so that they can watch out for you and make sure you're following, and to stay open-minded to whatever comes, regardless of class level, style, or teacher. Are you able to laugh at yourself if you get it all wrong? Rather than concentrating hard in order to follow precisely, can you let go? Let the words in, let them flow through you, and then tune them out. Relax the muscles of your face, unclench your palms, spread your toes, breathe, and begin to absorb the foreignness of the language. Observe the place and the other practitioners, and let the experience become part of your trip.

Chances are, you'll look around and realize that the language of yoga doesn't matter at all. We're all in search of the same thing—that ephemeral feeling that settles over us during or after a practice: a profound mind-body connection, awareness of breath, and, most important, a sense of quiet within. Because we are all, as the Thai like to say in English, “same same but different.”

Jennifer Lang is a certified yoga instructor and writer who relocated from White Plains, New York, to Raanana, Israel. Jennifer [blogs](#) about her adventures.

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