

# A ripple in the Zambezi

When Tej Rae moved to Zambia she realised that if she wanted to attend a yoga class, she would have to teach it. After 10 years, she was amazed at how the community embraced it

The sun has already set behind the basketball court in Lusaka, Zambia. Coltrane's Naima floats from battery-operated speakers over twenty-some bodies. Supine on their mats, the yogis are safe from the flying termites called inswa that swarm the neon lights. It has been a sweaty hour of vinyasa flow and the warmth of the asphalt seeps through the mats for the final relaxation. I walk barefoot on

the concrete, making adjustments. A union of stillness, after the ujjayi breath has subsided.

There are no strangers here, because in this sub-Saharan capital, there is usually only one degree of separation. I place my hand on the palm of our family doctor. I lengthen the neck of a soccer player whom I've met at parties. Pull the ankles of one of my high school English students at the American school. Touch the shoulder points of the programme director at Unicef.

The class came together without any definite intention. 'Life is what happens while you're making other plans,' I learned from John Lennon while I was still in college. The quote

was framed on the desk of the New York City therapist who hired me to babysit on Friday nights. Standing at the front door of my 20s, I had no idea what that meant.

When I moved to Zambia as a high school teacher in 1999, I searched in vain for a yoga class. In American cities, yoga studios were proliferating like popcorn, but the trend hadn't made it to this land-locked nation yet. On offer were step aerobics, karate, netball, golf, swimming and women's rugby, among others, but no yoga. Some prefer a solitary yoga practice, but I find I get much further with the energy of a group. It was clear that if I wanted a yoga class, I was going to have to teach it myself.



WORDS: TEJ RAE. IMAGES: SUPPLIED

It began at the end of karate class. I offered to lead the stretching segment for a class of mostly children. The Zambian teacher, Sensei Peter, took to the poses like the triple-dan black belt he was. When I showed him a headstand, he shot his feet up into the air and balanced with ease. "Oh," he said, "you mean like this?"

The end-of-class stretches grew into an hour of yoga following karate as Peter and others asked for more. I had studied ashtanga in America, so at first I followed the primary series. The gym was filled with Zambian bodybuilders, who could see the yoga class from the Nautilus machines. Some joined us. Others politely inquired about the relationship between yoga and witchcraft, and when was I going to levitate off the floor?

Borrowing from podcasts, books and classes I attended in Washington DC, the primary series morphed into vinyasa flow. I became known around town as 'the yoga teacher', despite the fact that I worked at the American International School. It was different in every way from being a school teacher. My yoga students needed no prodding to focus. There were no papers to »

## features

grade. And when I had my own children, I was able to quit my teaching job and replace my salary with what I earned from the class.

I had taken enough yoga and dance classes in America to figure out how to put a class together. My teaching ability evolved the way Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hours of skill-building does. You try something, you revise, you do it again, you get better.

Outside of class, teaching yoga in Zambia led to moments like this: I was walking around my quiet, leafy neighbourhood off Independence Avenue. Along a grassy slope, a group of young boys were practising side crow. One of the boys, Moses, learned it at a friend's house and now he was 'playing' side crow with the neighbourhood kids. I couldn't resist and knelt on the grass to join them.

Or this: Under a sprawling jacaranda tree, a group of Zambian mamas and grandmas gathered for an introductory class, sponsored by a local spa. Almost

a dozen women had come for a day of yoga, manicures and massages – the kind of women who were accustomed to being served tea on a tray. Wearing shorts and sweatpants, some had to be persuaded to remove their socks. At the first downward dog, they laughed and laughed. Upside down? On our hands? I wanted them to do what? My mind raced – what were we going to do for an hour if we couldn't do downward dog? I got creative with variations on forward bends, the cobbler, and cat and cow. But the women would not stop laughing for the whole session.

Meanwhile, to my delight, Sensei Peter took the practice and ran with it. He found books. He watched DVDs. He came to my classes to learn how to sequence the movements and soon he was teaching yoga to the Presidential Guard as part of their fitness training and leading sessions on Zambia National TV. Eventually, he stopped karate altogether and was only teaching yoga.

After a decade in Zambia, I found I had become something I never planned on, something I would not have come to directly. Short and stocky, with potato farmer ancestry, I do not have the willowy quality usually associated with yoga teachers. Instead, it evolved organically, breath by breath, while I doggedly pursued what I considered to be my 'real work' – teaching, writing, raising children.

In 2010, our family left Zambia to follow my husband's job. With a heavy heart, I passed the class on to other teachers, who continue to populate the basketball court with yoga mats. And now that it's over I recognise 'the thing that happened while I was making other plans' for the unlikely miracle that it was: those indigo moments after the sun set, inswa in the periphery, sweat dried by a balmy breeze except for one cold month in June. It could have happened anywhere, but it happened for me in Lusaka, Zambia. I miss it every day. ✨

### The end-of-class stretches turned into an

### hour of yoga following karate as people asked for more



What started as a brief stretching session after karate lessons turned into regular yoga classes during the 10 years Tej spent in Zambia.



TEJ RAE is a writer and yoga teacher who now lives in Dubai after 12 years in sub-Saharan Africa where she founded Africa's first children's museum, ImagiNation Afrika. She has two children and travels with her husband, who works for the United Nations.