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The beach bum yogi bending all the rules

Yoga enthusiasts don't want to get into downward facing dog for any instructor other than Rachel Brathen, finds **Alison O'Riordan**

HOSTING a workshop in Dublin on behalf of YogaHub, Swedish international yoga teacher Rachel Brathen — aka Yoga Girl — was greeted by an overwhelming following of like-minded people.

Without the space for a single additional yoga mat, people gathered at the studio to do a collection of basic and advanced poses. Some were seated, some were standing, but they were all united in their desire to further their knowledge of mind-boggling twists and get a piece of inspiration from the flexible beauty.

Beach bum and lover of life, Rachel has over 170,000 followers on Facebook and, in general, has a large social-media presence, affectionately known by her countless followers as The Yoga Girl.

Born and raised in Sweden, Rachel is a certified yoga instructor, writer, blogger, model, and a whole lot more.

The 25-year-old describes her personal interests as: "Love, in all its forms. Yoga, health, meditation. Exploring every corner of the world. Beach life. Delicious nutritious food. My three beautiful, somewhat crazy dogs. Husband. Family. Friends. Life."

The tanned instructor has been a follower of yoga since she fell truly, madly and deeply in love with the physical, mental and spiritual practice as a teenager.

Unfortunately, pain was the Swedish native's first encounter with yoga, which is now widely practised for health and relaxation reasons.

"I suffered from a lot of back pain in my teens, and heard yoga could help, that's how I started. My practice was very gentle in the beginning. One of my fondest memories is the first few months I started and was getting really into it, I went to Africa with my dad. I woke up early one morning, took my crappy, dusty yoga mat that I had bought at a market somewhere, and went up on the roof. I did my sun salutations to the sound of the Muslim prayers from a mosque nearby, not knowing if I was doing the movements correctly, just feeling very blissful. It's a

beautiful memory. Being a beginner is wonderful."

After graduating school she travelled to Costa Rica, where she lived for three years and found the joy of incorporating yoga into her everyday life by exploring the intricate studies of yoga and spirituality.

"It's a beautiful country and I miss it a whole lot. Very vibrant, amazing energy... In Costa Rica I found real balance for the first time and also travelled a lot. I started practising yoga daily, meditating every morning, spent my days quietly, on the beach, in the rain forest. I learned many of my greatest lessons during those years."

In early 2010, still chasing sunny climes, Rachel went on holiday to Aruba in the southern Caribbean Sea with her family, now a very memorable time as it was where she met her husband Dennis who she married in June of this year.

"The second day of our trip I walked into a surf shop, and there he was. It was a little crazy and I moved to Aruba after we'd only known each other for a few days, but here we are four years later, and got married in June."

Dennis now travels everywhere with his yoga-teacher wife and also handles a whole lot of the administration work and the business side of what Rachel does.

"We do everything together, and he is a teacher, too, so he assists the classes. Soon we'll be co-teaching."

After teaching yoga full-time on the sun-drenched island which consists of white sandy beaches and bluer than blue skies, Rachel got a job in Aruba where she once taught 24 yoga classes a week, now she teaches just two when she is home and relieved of her hectic travel commitments.

Based in Paradera, Oranjestad, in Aruba, Rachel's classes are a dynamic Vinyasa Flow integrating alignment, core work, and breathing techniques with basic poses and creative sequencing.

"Yoga is a wonderful practice, not just physically but emotionally and spiritually as well. Through yoga you cultivate strength, flexibility, physical balance, but more importantly it connects you to the

breath and allows you to cultivate presence. Yoga helps you get to the bottom of what's actually important, it helps you create space... It calms the mind, which I think is the most important part of the practice."

Now leading workshops all across the globe as a full-time job like for the YogaHub last February in the Milltown Institute in Ranelagh, the agile teacher focuses on handstands, arm balances, vinyasa foundation and fearless living. Each class is designed to energise the body, cultivate a meditative consciousness, and give greater vitality and health.

"I play fun music in my classes, I talk a lot about what's beyond the mat and deeper in our hearts. I love teaching. I am very playful in class, but I am really good at tuning into what each person needs. My classes are more about loving yourself and letting go of the old than alignment in downward dog."

"Of course alignment and the physical aspect of the practice is very important, but at the core of everything lies something deeper. I love connecting to that and uniting the class in a way that goes deeper than the body. There is usually lots of laughter, and when needed, lots of crying. We hold on to so much and yoga allows us to release" says the spiritual goddess.

One of the first people in the world to lead the way for yoga away from the mat and onto a paddle board, the beach bum teaches SUP Yoga (Stand-Up Paddle board Yoga) in all of her retreats, eight to nine annually and also at festivals and events in different countries around the world.

"I started teaching SUP Yoga five years ago which is super fun. It's a playful practice, and where I live here in the Caribbean

its perfect. The water is turquoise blue, clear and warm. Falling off feels good.

"I teach at various festivals all over the world which changes every year. I have taught at Wanderlust in the past which brings together

the world's leading yoga teachers and top-tier musical performers in settings of breathtaking natural beauty, but not this year, then Envision Festival in Costa Rica and some other places all around. I prefer to teach SUP Yoga in Aruba though, it's just such an unbeatable experience."

Not an inventor of SUP but rather a leader in the SUP Yoga community, the technique has blossomed around the world.

"I created my first class four-and-a-half years ago, and at that time it was completely unheard of. We had a big write-up in the *New York Times*, and from there things kind of exploded. SUP Yoga got real big after that."

With a colourful and at the same time seriously enviable Instagram account, @yoga_girl, the hippy-sque traveller charts her travels to all places balmy and beachy dotted.

She has one million fans on Instagram, and it is now one of the largest yoga accounts in the world.

Rachel has really popularised the practice of yoga and helped make it extremely accessible and inspirational through her colourful and optimistic Instagram posts.

"It's fun. It's a beautiful way to connect with like-minded people all over the world. And, it's the reason my classes and retreats are so full these days... I am very grateful."

In total she has over an overwhelming 1.2 million followers

through the social mediums of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

With a huge love for all things sea and sand, the fun-loving contortionist can't live without it.

"Seriously I need the ocean. We just moved to a house right on the north shore of the island so I get to wake up to the ocean every day... It's amazing. The ocean heals me. It's a lifestyle I can't even think about living without. I take my dogs to the beach pretty much every day when I'm home."

The inspiring yoga teacher maintains it is only yoga, and no other exercise, that has given her her kick-ass booty and strong yet lean body.

"That's all. I'm in good shape, but I honestly think it's more because of the fact that I don't obsess over my body than anything else. Sometimes I gain a little weight, sometimes I lose a little... It's all good. I try to move in ways that make me happy."

A vegetarian, and since earlier this year wheat-free, Rachel was vegan for many years but found it too tricky living on a tiny island in the Caribbean.

"We have no organic food, no health food stores, no veggie restaurants. I haven't had meat in seven or eight years, and never drink milk or eat eggs. Cheese, however, I'm a big fan of these days. And chocolate. And wine... I drink a lot of wine."

On her time spent in Dublin earlier this year, Rachel thoroughly enjoyed it but the obscure weather didn't go unnoticed.

"It was awesome. I wish we had more time to explore. The weather was weird though."

More info: www.rachelbrathen.com/ instagram: @yoga_girl.

The YogaHub have many international teachers like Rachel Brathen coming every month, see www.theyogahub.ie.

Upcoming workshops:

- Aligning With Nature's Rhythm - Marc Holzman
- A weekend with Tara Judell - Tara Judelle
- AcroYoga Elemental Immersion - Erica Montes and Julia Weis
- A Weekend of Workshops - Nico Luce



Rachel demonstrates some Stand Up Paddle Board yoga in Aruba