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Meditate on This: Yoga Is Big Business

By **SUSAN MORAN**

Under dim lights and pulsating techno-trance music, the vast room at a recent yoga conference in a mountain town northwest of Boulder, Colo., looked like a rave club, without the drugs. Some 140 people formed fluid concentric circles around Shiva Rea, a globe-trotting yoga-dance instructor from Los Angeles.

In a room next door, 64 vendors of clothing, accessories, books, skin-care products and other yoga-related enticements attended to customers and watched the class from the doorway.

Suddenly, Ms. Rea ordered the sweaty crowd to chant and trance-dance their way into the neighboring marketplace. Students snaked their way through four narrow isles of clothing as vendors encouraged them to return.

Welcome to the 11th annual Yoga Journal conference in Estes Park, Colo., where yoga students and teachers from around the country spent hundreds of dollars to take classes from renowned instructors like Ms. Rea, Rodney Yee, Richard Freeman and Seane Corn. And to shop.

The conference taps into an ever-growing pool of yogis. The number of Americans who practice yoga at least twice a week jumped 133 percent, to 3 million this year from 1.3 million in 2001, according to a survey conducted by Mediamark Research. The figures are based on interviews Mediamark conducts each year with roughly 26,000 people as part of a larger survey. (The margin of error is 5 percent.) As of last spring, more than 10 million people said they had practiced yoga at least once in the last 12 months.

In 2004, the most recent year tracked, Americans spent \$2.95 billion on yoga classes, yoga-related products like clothing, books and mats, and on yoga retreats and vacations, according to a survey of nearly 4,800 people conducted for Yoga Journal.

Yoga has stretched far beyond its meditative, baggy-sweats roots to become a fashionable lifestyle pursuit appealing as much to competitive marathon runners and college students as it does to om-chanting meditators. Curve-hugging styles in Lycra, cotton and microfibers come from a variety of yoga-inspired brands, including Prana, Be Present, Inner Waves, and

Lululemon Athletica, as well as [Nike](#) and Fila.

In a sign of how this niche is gaining mainstream appeal, last year Liz Claiborne bought Prana. Beaver Theodosakis and his wife, Pam, founded Prana 13 years ago in their garage in Carlsbad, Calif. They said they wanted to design flexible and stylish clothes for yoga practitioners and rock climbers. Prana's sales had reached \$30 million by the time Liz Claiborne bought it, according to Mr. Theodosakis. Neither company disclosed the purchase price.

"No doubt yoga for us is the biggest part of the visibility of our brand," Mr. Theodosakis said in a phone interview from the company's headquarters in Vista, Calif.

Little has changed since Liz Claiborne bought Prana, except that Prana now can reach more shoppers and suppliers worldwide. At 2:45 p.m. every day, a Chinese gong still reverberates through the 40,000-square-foot office building, jolting employees into a "mandatory one-minute meditation." At the end of every day, employees gather (voluntarily) on the roof overlooking the Pacific for a yoga class taught by Mr. Theodosakis.

Lululemon Athletica, a professed "yoga-inspired athletic apparel company" based in Vancouver, British Columbia, this year hired a former chief executive of Reebok, Robert Meers, to run the company. Lululemon is expanding in Japan and especially in the United States, where the company operates 10 stores and plans to open 30 next year and eventually 200, Mr. Meers said.

The global reach of yoga is also reflected in the recent outcropping of new yoga studios and studio chains like Pure Yoga in Hong Kong. Riding that momentum is Yoga Journal magazine, which is now published in Russia, Spain, Italy and Thailand, and next year will add Hong Kong and Brazil.

"Yoga has moved into a much broader marketplace," said Bill Harper, publisher of Yoga Journal. "So many people are introducing products for the space, and they're all rising with the tide."

Increasingly, major corporations outside the athletics and mind-body arenas are aiming their advertisements at this lucrative market. [Prudential Financial](#), for instance, is running a "Live Long Live Well" campaign. A svelte woman in her 60s stretches in a triangle pose in the ads. "Yoga personifies the idea of health, and we've been making a concerted effort to tie well-being into finances," said Maria Umbach, a vice president for marketing in Prudential's life insurance unit.

[Ford Motor](#) sought young and fit career women this year in its “Live and Drive” ad campaign for its \$18,000 Fusion car. The ads featured a woman in her 20s taking a yoga class in which she is straining to lift her body vertically into an arm-stand pose that other students around her are holding perfectly.

“This woman is in the target audience. Yoga is very popular for that age group,” said Elizabeth Boone, group account director at JWT, the unit of [WPP Group](#) that created the ads for Ford. Ms. Boone has not overlooked that yoga is growing fastest within the 18-to-24-year-old group.

Jewelry designers are also tailoring their products to serve this burgeoning niche. Sonja Picard, a Canadian designer, for instance, inscribes ancient Vedic sutras in some of her silver necklaces and bracelets. Price tags for these added touches can be heaven-high.

“We do charge more for the research,” said Heather Askinose, a co-founder of Energy Muse Jewelry, whose tagline is “activating jewelry through intention.” Ms. Askinose and her business partner, Timmi Jandro, promise their customers that each jewelry piece is strung by a Vietnamese family in Los Angeles. It is also “cleansed” of all human contact and energy for 48 hours in a room where it is “vibrationally aligned with music” before being wrapped in a cotton pouch. Each necklace comes with a message, or “intention” — confidence, tranquillity, happiness, performance, and so on.

Energy Muse Jewelry, which is based in Torrance, Calif., also attracts celebrity endorsers, including Hollywood’s favorite guru, Deepak Chopra; the inspirational speaker and author Anthony Robbins; and the Los Angeles Lakers coach [Phil Jackson](#).

Back at the yoga conference, Angie Amburgey selected a carnelian and turquoise necklace at the crowded Energy Muse kiosk. She said she was drawn to its “voice” message and its elegance.

“I can’t believe I paid \$100 for this necklace,” said Ms. Amburgey, 32, a marketing professional from Columbus, Ohio, while rubbing the Chinese coin pendant on her necklace. “It’s brilliant marketing, isn’t it? I should know. But they said it’ll help me with expression issues. Besides, I’m on vacation.”

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