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Community news for Byron Bay and surrounds

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John Ogilvie: 35yrs of local Byron yoga

Please note: This article contains mentions of suicide, drug use and drug addiction. If these topics are sensitive to you, please proceed with caution.

Byron Yoga Centre's 35 anniversary marks a significant milestone, as a local business in Byron Bay, and as the longest running Yoga Centre in Australia. Founded by local John Ogilvie in 1988, the Yoga Centre was born from John's personal drive to create a better future for himself and others, after suffering through many despairing years of drug addiction and emptiness.

'My journey with yoga began over 45 years ago when I was living in Melbourne. At that time, I had reached the lowest point in my life, struggling with drug addiction and a deep sense of emptiness. I was in a black hole,' said John. 'At 23 years old, I made a conscious decision to terminate my life with an overdose. Fortunately I survived, and embarked on my detox journey. At one rehab centre, I was introduced to yoga. It was very basic, and while it helped, it did not fill the void within, and I would slip back into using.'

After multiple failed rehab attempts, John finally found solace in the Northern Rivers through The Buttery Rehabilitation Centre. 'I managed to work up the courage to check myself in. I was grappling with failure and shame, but it was here that I was able to integrate the spiritual guidelines of the 12 step program with the practice and philosophies of yoga. By practising what I learnt at The Buttery and daily yoga, I succeeded in 'healing the hole' that had haunted me since my teens, but not without some scar tissue, which acts as a healthy reminder of how far I've come and inspires me to continue my discipline. I had finally found peace and happiness within myself.'

The Buttery Rehabilitation Centre brought John to Byron Bay, and, like so many others, he fell in love with the town. While

John has seen Byron go through many changes, he says that he loves that it still has a small town feel while being a hustling, bustling place with interesting people from all over the world. 'There's never a dull moment,' he said. 'I love the environmentally aware, spiritually connected community, and of course the climate and beautiful beaches. It was all these things and more that kept me here after The Buttery.'

In 1986 John taught his first yoga class and in 1988, Byron Yoga Centre was born in the Epicentre – a centre for creatives transformed from the old meat factory. Here, John offered yoga classes and set up an affordable yoga teacher training program. He was desperate to share his new found love with the world and make it accessible to everyone.

'The first styles of yoga that I practised,' said John, 'were very gentle hatha yoga in the Satyananda and Shivananda traditions. I then discovered the Iyengar technique which is highly focused on postural alignment and the use of yoga props. After that I started practising Ashtanga yoga which is a more dynamic flowing sequence of postures. But after a while I realised that these styles weren't suitable for all bodies, and I also wanted to incorporate more of the pranayama (breathing exercises), meditation and the philosophy into the practice. I recognised value in each of these styles of yoga and wanted to combine them all. By incorporating the flowing vinyasa of Ashtanga yoga with the detailed alignment from Iyengar, as well as the more gentle and compassionate approach of the Satyananda and Shivananda styles, I realised this made for a much more holistic and complete practice. So, I called this yoga Purna, which is the sanskrit word for integrated or complete.'



In 2009, after 21 years of teaching yoga in the Epicentre, the building was sold to developers and demolished. Fortunately John and his team were lucky enough to purchase the property that would become the forever home for Byron Yoga Centre. 'While the idea for a yoga retreat developed naturally, as a part of my long-term goals and the loss of our space at the Epicentre, I also saw the need for an affordable opportunity for people to experience a yoga retreat. A place to deepen their yoga practice and to be taught the principles of mindfulness and sustainability,' said John.

A breathtaking 30-acre parcel of land only 1km from town, the site had historically been cleared of vegetation for agricultural purposes. However, the surrounding area holds wetlands of state significance, sensitive coastal dunes, coastal swamp forests and riparian areas. The site also contains three endangered ecological communities, which provide habitat for a wide range of native animals including threatened species such as the black-necked stork, koalas, large-footed myotis and little bent-wing bat.

'Since we purchased the property, we have been on a dedicated journey to weave sustainability into the very fabric of our ethos. We recognise the profound interconnectedness between our well-being, the health of our planet, and the vitality of our shared communities. Our commitment to sustainability isn't just a choice; it's a way of life. The landscape of the Centre, and its greater surrounding area, is made up of many features that are interconnected. These include the land, waters, plants, animals, and it includes special places and stories with historical and current uses for Bundjalung nation and Byron Bay Arakwal people. These features are seen as inseparable.'

Since conception, the Center has blossomed with 30 staff, six yoga spaces, and 15 devoted teachers. It boasts various accommodation options ensuring a place for everyone, regardless of budget. With focus on sustainability, it is solar powered, with compost toilets, rainwater tanks, and three acres of beautiful organic gardens – which is the main source for the Centre's vegetarian menu. They also have a solar heated 20m mineral salt swimming pool rich in magnesium.

John's aspiration to create a sustainable eco-village, with a focus on attaining the most minimal carbon footprint possible, extends far beyond the Centre's continuously improving sustainability practices. 'It's from this place that we can discover how to become the best version of ourselves, and how to start to live a sustainable life for ourselves, the community which we live in and planet Earth as a whole,' said John. 'The people who come here experience mindfulness, yoga, a healthy vegetarian diet, and are introduced to the principles of our sustainability, then they go home and spread these sentiments to their work colleagues, family and friends. It creates a beautiful flow-on effect, and together, we can create positive ripples that extend far beyond our yoga mats.'

However, it hasn't all been smooth running. Similar to many local businesses in Byron Bay and across Australia, Byron Yoga Centre has suffered from bushfires, temporary closures

due to COVID-19, the major flood event of 2022, and the current economic downturn. John attributes the Centre's resilience to the local community. 'It's thanks to our beautiful community that we have been able to keep our doors open and continue providing what we love.'

In the spirit of gratitude and community, John consistently provides excess food to Liberation Larder, donates a percentage of profits to The Buttery on a quarterly basis, and donates to Rainforest Rescue and Food for Life. He also practises free yoga for local primary schools. John's vision has remained steadfast – to make yoga accessible to everyone, without exclusivity. 'We constantly aspire to spread the peace of yoga to every town and village, for we believe that yoga has the potential to change the world – as it did mine.'

Byron Yoga Centre now provides yoga retreats every week of the year for all ages and abilities, and offers yoga teacher trainings with an expansion to include yoga for those suffering from trauma, health focused ayurveda training, and training for teaching seniors yoga. To celebrate 35 years, Byron Yoga Centre is giving away a seven-day yoga retreat valued at \$3,490. To enter, tell them in 35 words why you need a yoga retreat at Byron Yoga Centre.

For more information visit: byronyoga.com

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