



PURSUITS

In Rural Virginia, Yogaville Is Simply Divine

By Chris Bolgiano
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The shrine is shaped like a flower, but it pokes up from the meadow like the tip of a giant thumb. Huge pink petals, made of hundreds of thousands of tiny Italian tiles in shades ranging from white to rose, clasp a sky-blue dome that is crowned with a golden spire. At its base, a waterfall crashes, just loud enough to cover the rumble of diesel pumps. The long white walkway that leads toward the shrine is flanked on one side by flowers of every hue, on the other by a pool that flashes with goldfish. Stone lions and elephants stand sentinel along the way. The entrance is a tall pink facade with arches in a style that blends the Alamo with the Taj Mahal. Welcome to the Lotus Shrine at Yogaville, in Buckingham County, Virginia.

That's right: Yogaville is the formal name of this 750 acres of Indian subcontinent along the otherwise all-American James River, 47 miles south of Charlottesville. It's also called Satchidananda Ashram, after the guru who founded it. The lotus is not only an ancient symbol of spirituality, floating on worldly waters without becoming wet, but also is the acronym for the Light of Truth Universal Shrine.

In Indian tradition, an ashram is a secluded setting for a community wishing to live a life of simplicity and religious meditation. Roughly 135 souls live in scattered modest homes at Yogaville. Some work at the ashram, others hold jobs in the outside world. All practice a lifestyle based on integral yoga, a philosophy that incorporates classic Hatha yoga stretches and exercises with daily meditations,

shared garden and maintenance chores, various techniques for holistic health, and a lively program of community celebrations. My husband and I visited Yogaville on the afternoon of Guru Purnima, the biggest celebration of the year.

It was the middle of summer, hot and sticky. I hung my arms out of the car and counted Baptist churches along the way. By the time we got to the shrine, the lake that curved around behind it provoked visions of skinny-dipping in my mind. But we stepped beyond the sheet of falling water at the base of the shrine into a cool, pleasant atmosphere. The Lotus was air-conditioned. This made it easier to follow the wall-mounted instructions to "quiet the mind, realize the self."

We found ourselves in a large room. Built along the sides were 10 glass cases displaying artifacts and quotations from 10 religious traditions of the world—Hinduism, Judaism, Shinto, Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, African and Native American. Other Known Religions were also given their due. In fact, so inclusive is Yogaville's embrace of the nondenominational light that illuminates all faiths that there is even homage directed to Faiths Still Unknown.

We went out the back door onto a veranda and peered into an office window. Beside a computer console, a body in loose white clothes lay flat and absolutely motionless on its back. We couldn't see its head. The arms and legs were slightly spread in what we decided must be a meditative posture.

Back inside, we climbed a tiny spiral staircase up to the shrine itself. The room had a calm blue aura. A small altar stood in the middle, from which a white shaft-like PVC pipe rose to the sunlit center of the dome above. Along the circular wall were 12 pointed arches, each with a slender ribbon of blue neon running from the point of the arch to the light at the

Yogaville



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The Lotus Shrine at Yogaville

YOGAVILLE, From E1

center of the dome. The hum of electricity reverberated through the silence.

"Clever," whispered my husband Ralph, ever alert for puns. "They've built in the ohmmmmmmmm."

A very nice lady kept the Lotus gift shop open for a few extra minutes so we could exclaim over the glorious cactus garden, browse through the instructional yoga videos for kids, pick over the peacock

feathers, finger the lotus night-lights and snap up some postcards. Then we drove a few minutes down the road to the auditorium.

Fifty pairs of shoes filled a wooden rack along the lobby wall of Sri Swami Sivananda Centenary Hall. Shoes are removed upon entering any public building at Yogaville, and you could tell the visitors from the residents by whether their shoes had laces. Here, there were mostly sandals.

As we wandered around, slight sense of culture shock persisted. In

the crowd were quite a few dark-haired, sari-draped women with dots in the middle of their foreheads, and Indian names predominated on the roster of Yogaville's Honorary Advisory Council. On the other hand, the openness of the talk and laughter, the freedom to ramble around the grounds and the readily granted permission to take pictures felt distinctly American.

Large framed portraits of saints and visionaries from many cultures lined the auditorium walls. "That bald guy looks familiar," Ralph said,

puzzling over possible identities as we walked into a small cafeteria-style facility. As we took trays, the young man I'd paid for our meal tapped me on the shoulder and apologized for making a mistake. "We're not charging today," he said, handing me back my money.

There were four choices: parsleyed potatoes, green salad, green salad with tomatoes and green salad with cucumbers. "Where's the beef?" whispered my husband, an inveterate slayer of—need I say it?—sacred cows. Fortunately, this was before I noticed that the sign requesting silence at meals exempted weekends.

On the condiment table was a huge bowl of fruit, at least a dozen one-pound slabs of real butter and a jar of brown stuff. I couldn't figure out where all the butter was supposed to go, but I decided to try the brown stuff as salad dressing. It turned out to be peanut butter, and not bad at all on tomatoes. Later I learned that lunch, rather than dinner, is the main meal of the day.

By the time we finished eating the crowd had swelled. There was a cheerful chaos; children ran about as adults waved and greeted one another. Many were dressed in white—not in uniforms, but in various pale shades of T-shirts, shirts with lacy edging, jeans, cotton dresses, even a white tuxedo jacket. One pretty young woman wore a frilly white blouse with padded shoulders and big, dangly earrings. The spiritual plane bisects the fashion plane—Sri Swami Ralph Lauren? Clearly, Yogaville devotees have room to maneuver in seeking a balance between temporal temptations and spiritual simplicity. There is, for example, a federally insured Yogaville credit union, and a newsletter with a real estate section.

Toward the front of the auditorium, a video camera waited on a tripod for the action to begin. Guru Poornima is a Hindu holiday celebrated every July to honor the spiritual teachers of the world and, at Yogaville, the ashram's own teacher, the guru Satchidananda. The program was called Offerings and Sharings.

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Above the clatter of silverware being washed rose a loud "Ommmmmm." People began to sit on the floor and in the folding chairs facing the stage, which—except for the pointed arch at the back—looked like any school stage, hung with heavy drapes. At each end of the stage sat a life-size paper cutout of a swami representing Satchidananda and his teacher, Sivananda, after whom the hall was named.

Several men and women in salmon-colored robes stood at the edges of the crowd. These, the friendly and voluble woman in white beside me explained, were some of Yogaville's 25 to 30 monks. A quivering, cracking, melancholy chant issued from a woman sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the stage. Her voice slid up and down the scale in what was to my Western ears a most plaintive wail, but the audience smiled, so apparently it wasn't a dirge. Many in the audience, now close to 200 people, began to clap along.

Then the crowd rose to its feet, just as it had when I was a child in church, and the priest entered. Satchidananda walked slowly down the center aisle. He was slightly stooped. His face was composed and peaceful. The hair hanging over his salmon robe was as long and gray as his beard. People bowed as he passed. He paused to pinch a child's cheek.

The chanting took on an urgency, and the guru moved on, settling into a vinyl easy chair facing the stage.

Satchidananda lives in a spacious modern house overlooking the Lotus, but he frequently takes off from the Lotus International Airstrip for speaking engagements around the world. For many years he has sponsored ecumenical services to bring together clergy of different faiths for the promotion of world peace. Several organizations have given him humanitarian awards.

As the program got underway, the primary grades of the Yogaville school (which runs to junior high) performed something called the Numbers Rhumba, stomping and clapping with hilarious uncoordination. The guru laughed and clapped. Then they sang Indian songs from Satchidananda's childhood. He beckoned them to him for a kiss.

Next, a teenager began to recite a poem she had written for him.

My husband turned to look at me, a certain horror dawning in his face. "It's a school Christmas play," he said.

"His entire existence is a rushing river of love," the young woman was saying with typical adolescent

excess of emotion. But when she finished, she teased him in such a playful way that it was clear she viewed him as a human being, not a divinity.

Honored guests were now introduced to give testimony about Satchidananda. First was a man whose name I didn't catch, but who was, my neighbor assured me, the richest man in Hong Kong. It was to him that the thousands of Italian tiles that formed the petals of the shrine's lotus could be credited. He sat on the stage and talked on and on of meeting the guru years ago, of discipline and austerity, of loving kindness.

With an hour's drive home facing us, and an unknown number of testimonials to come, Ralph and I politely excused ourselves between guests. But we could have stayed—Yogaville welcomes visitors who seek to open themselves to inner peace. Accommodations range from dormitories for singles to mobile homes for families to rooms at the newly completed Lotus Inn and General Store. The very reasonable rates include three vegetarian meals and all regularly scheduled programs. By now it shouldn't surprise you that credit cards are accepted. Nor should it come as a surprise that in a community where the biggest event of the year is a school recital, visitors are asked to wear modest dress and swimwear (so much for skinny-dipping), and to leave drugs, alcohol, tobacco and pets at home.

Except for special occasions such as Guru Poornima, the usual routine on Saturday nights at Yogaville is a short session of chanting and singing, followed by a question-and-answer period with the guru when he's in residence. The audience writes questions down, and Satchidananda reads and answers them. This is intriguing enough that we are thinking of going back. Ralph wants to know why the paper-doll figure of Sivananda is sitting on an animal's skin. I would like to ask about the serpentine line between humor and irreverence. So if you plan to go to Yogaville, be thinking of a question.

The Light of Truth Universal Shrine (LOTUS) is open Monday through Thursday, 10 a.m. to noon and 2 to 6 p.m., Fridays until 9 p.m., and on weekends from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. For directions and information on accommodations, contact the Guestmaster, Satchidananda Ashram—Yogaville, Buckingham, Va. 23921, (804) 969-3121.

Chris Bolgiano, a freelance writer from Virginia, once managed to attain the lotus meditative position.