

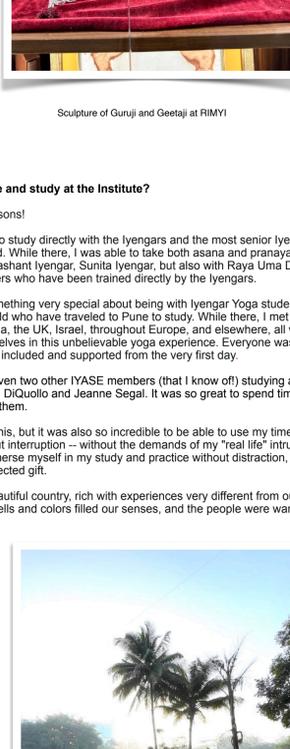
PUNE 1.0

The idea of going all the way to Pune, India and attending the RIMYI can be pretty overwhelming. We asked first-timer Raina Fishbane about the ins and outs of her trip. Her answers provide insights and impressions, along with some great tips for other first-timers.

How did you decide to go to Pune? Had you been thinking of it for a while or was it spur of the moment?

I decided I wanted to go to India pretty spontaneously one day last year. I had been studying Iyengar yoga for a long time and had been teaching it already for a few years. I was talking to my husband one day and realized that a trip to RIMYI would give me the chance to deepen my practice in a way impossible to do otherwise.

I was nervous, honestly, about making such a big trip on my own, but my husband agreed to travel with me which made the decision easier. Now having done it, I realize I had nothing to be nervous about and would do it again on my own in a heartbeat.



Sculpture of Gururji and Geetaji at RIMYI

So, why go to Pune and study at the Institute?

There are many reasons!

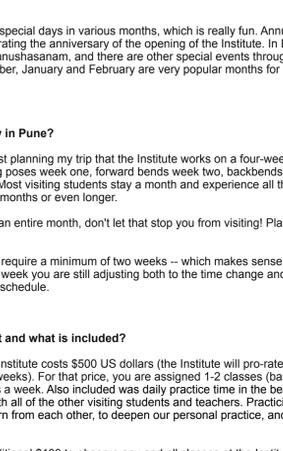
First and foremost, to study directly with the Iyengars and the most senior Iyengar yoga teachers in the world. While there, I was able to take both asana and pranayama classes with Abhijata Iyengar, Prashant Iyengar, Sunita Iyengar, but also with Raya Uma Datta and the next generation of teachers who have been trained directly by the Iyengars.

But there is also something very special about being with Iyengar Yoga students and teachers from around the world who have traveled to Pune to study. While there, I met amazing men and women from Australia, the UK, Israel, throughout Europe, and elsewhere, all with the same goal – to immerse themselves in this unbelievable yoga experience. Everyone was warm and welcoming and I felt included and supported from the very first day.

In fact, there were even two other IYASE members (that I know of) studying at the Institute at the same time: Leah DiQuollo and Jeanne Segal. It was so great to spend time with and share the experience with them.

I had not expected this, but it was also so incredible to be able to use my time in Pune to practice yoga without interruption – without the demands of my “real life” intruding on my practice. I could immerse myself in my study and practice without distraction, which was such a beautiful and unexpected gift.

Finally, India is a beautiful country, rich with experiences very different from our day-to-day lives. The sounds and smells and colors filled our senses, and the people were warm and interesting and kind.



IYASE members Raina Fishbane and Jeanne Segal at a park near the Institute between classes

Should I wait until I am a more advanced yogini to attend RIMYI?

You DO NOT need to be a teacher or even a particularly advanced student to study at the Institute!

There were teachers there who had been studying Iyengar Yoga for 40 or even 50 years, and had been to RIMYI so many times before. But, there were also students who were relatively inexperienced. I met an amazing 19-year-old woman from the UK who had taken classes back home but decided to immerse herself completely in this experience!

As long as you are a dedicated Iyengar student, and have the support of a certified Iyengar teacher, you can go and experience the amazing classes at the Institute. They assign you a class schedule based on your level of experience – so while teachers are generally assigned the more advanced classes, less experienced students will be able to enjoy and learn from beginner or intermediate classes.

How do you get there?

Many people fly into Pune, a large city with an active airport. But others, including myself, fly into Mumbai and then arrange for a car to drive the 3-4 hours from the Mumbai airport to Pune. I found cheaper flights, with better connections, flying into Mumbai instead of flying all the way to Pune. But after traveling all the way to Mumbai, that car ride to Pune felt long!

There are some non-stop flights from major US cities to Mumbai and Delhi, but generally expect to have to change planes. I traveled through Dubai. I was actually happy I had broken up the flight, and the Dubai airport is fun to explore.

What month should I go? What's the weather like?

There are benefits to many different months.

I spent January in Pune. There is no air conditioning in the Institute but there are many windows and ceiling fans. In January/winter in Pune the temperature still got up to the high 80s most afternoons, but I never felt too warm in the classes. Friends have said, however, it is very warm practicing there in the summer months.

Monsoon season is considered June until September, when the area is prone to heavy rains. A friend of mine loves going in October, when the rains have stopped and everything feels refreshed and quiet.

The Institute celebrates special days in various months, which is really fun. Annual Day is in January, basically celebrating the anniversary of the opening of the Institute. In December, the Institute celebrates Yogashastam, and there are other special events throughout the year. My sense is that December, January and February are very popular months for people to travel to study at the Institute.

How long should I stay in Pune?

I did not realize when first planning my trip that the Institute works on a four-week schedule. (Very generally, standing poses week one, forward bends week two, backbends week three and pranayama week four.) Most visiting students stay a month and experience all the different classes. Some stay two months or even longer.

But if you cannot go for an entire month, don't let that stop you from visiting! Plan on two or three weeks, instead.

I think the Institute does require a minimum of two weeks – which makes sense. It is a long trip to get there and the first week you are still adjusting both to the time change and to the rhythm of the Institute and their schedule.

How much does it cost and what is included?

A month of study at the Institute costs \$500 US dollars (the Institute will pro-rate this cost if you are just studying for two weeks). For that price, you are assigned 1-2 classes (based on your level) each day, six days a week. Also included was daily practice time in the beautiful and inspiring practice hall with all of the other visiting students and teachers. Practicing together gave us a chance to learn from each other, to deepen our personal practice, and to forge friendships.

You can also pay an additional \$100 to observe any and all classes at the Institute. I paid that extra fee and am so glad I did – every day I would observe one or two additional classes and got so much out of that experience.

Where should I stay?

There are two main choices for accommodations when visiting Pune and the Institute.

Most people stay in a nearby apartment, usually an easy walk to the Institute. Apartment owners rent out rooms to visitors and often several visitors end up in an apartment together, so you likely will not have the apartment to yourself. Having roommates is a great way to get to know others studying at the Institute, and provides instant companions as you navigate your way around this new city. You can also arrange for cooking and housekeeping services for the apartments. You should note that most of the apartments do not have air conditioning. The apartments are not fancy and the beds are generally wood platforms with a cot on top, but are generally clean and comfortable.

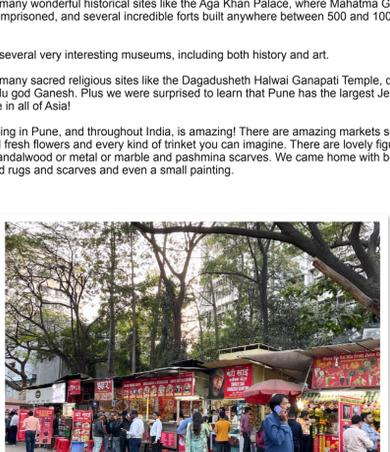
Other visitors to the Institute choose instead to stay in a hotel. Pune is a large city with many very nice hotels. Some are walking distance to the Institute, others require an Uber (Ubers are very easy in Pune) or an auto rickshaw ride. There are US brand hotels, and also many smaller Indian hotels. Compared to the US, even the nicest hotels in Pune are relatively inexpensive.

Finally, there are Airbnbs in Pune and visiting students may enjoy staying in homes with local residents.

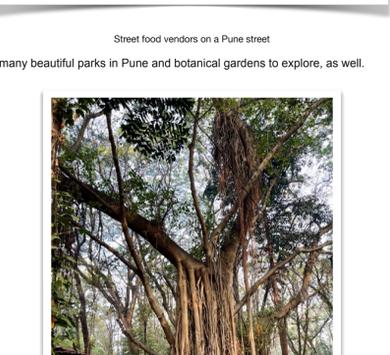
I stayed in a hotel because I thought it would be easier for my first trip to India. There were pros and cons. The Marriott hotel was beautiful and it felt very familiar. I knew there would always be bottled water in the room and that if I needed anything, the hotel staff could easily help. At the same time, I was a drive away from the Institute, so I had to spend too much time in Pune traffic going to and from classes. Also, most of the visiting students and teachers were staying in apartments very close to the Institute, so I definitely felt a little more apart.

What does a typical day look like?

Classes at the Institute can start as early as 5:45 am, and can run until 8 pm. The Institute, however, is closed between 12 noon and 3 pm each day.



Inside the studio, which is lined with inspiring photos of Gururji



A local chai stand where the teachers would often go between classes

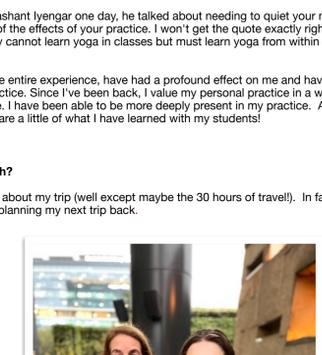
I would often get up early and go to the earliest class of the day. When done, many of the students and teachers would walk to get chai and something to eat. Then, back to the Institute to observe a class, or enjoy our group practice time.

At noon, we would head back to our apartments or hotels to eat lunch and rest before the afternoon. We would then go back to the Institute, do our practice if we hadn't done it in the morning, spend time in the library, and then observe another asana class or the medical classes (if appropriate). Then, back home for dinner before falling into bed exhausted from the day!

What was the food like?

Each area of India has slightly different food, but throughout India there is a wide range of vegetarian options, as well as “non-veg”, as they call it. The food is generally slightly spicy, but so incredibly delicious. And since Pune is a very cosmopolitan city, there are restaurants serving many different types of cuisines – in fact, one of my favorite restaurants was a Japanese restaurant.

You do, however, need to be careful with food and water to avoid bacterial pathogens. It is very important to drink only bottled, filtered, or boiled water. We very sadly avoided fresh fruits and vegetables during our stay. It is recommended to stick with freshly-cooked food that is still hot. Some people we know did have some slight gastro issues, but we had no problem at all.

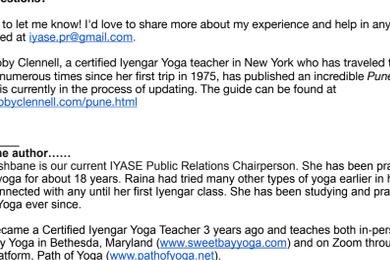


A local Pune street scene

How do I make arrangements at the Iyengar center?

You need to apply and be accepted to study at the Institute. You write to the office at the Institute at office@rimyi.org and they will then send you back a short application.

Note: You will need to attach a letter of recommendation from an Iyengar Yoga teacher with your final application. The application has to be a pdf or it won't upload, as we learned the hard way.



The sign outside the Institute

Do I need to get any vaccinations before traveling?

We visited a travel health clinic before we traveled and followed their advice. Staying only in Pune, and only in January, we needed only to get the typhoid vaccine and to make sure our other vaccinations were up to date. But you should check with your own health care provider about other vaccines you may need. And since malaria and dengue fever do exist throughout India, it is important to take precautions to avoid mosquitos.

Is there anything else to do besides yoga?

There is quite a bit to see in Pune.

There are many wonderful historical sites like the Aga Khan Palace, where Mahatma Gandhi was once imprisoned, and several incredible forts built anywhere between 500 and 1000 years ago.

There are several very interesting museums, including both history and art.

There are many sacred religious sites like the Dagadusheth Halwai Ganapati Temple, dedicated to the Hindu god Ganesh. Plus we were surprised to learn that Pune has the largest Jewish synagogue in all of Asia!

The shopping in Pune, and throughout India, is amazing! There are amazing markets selling spices and fresh flowers and every kind of trinket you can imagine. There are lovely figurines made of sandalwood or metal or marble and pashmina scarves. We came home with beautiful clothes and rugs and metals and even a small painting.



Street food vendors on a Pune street

There are many beautiful parks in Pune and botanical gardens to explore, as well.



Banyan tree at a local park

Also, at the Institute there is a wonderful store and an absolutely incredible library. The store carries all of the books by the Iyengars and other related books, as well as props, and some T-shirts, too! But my favorite was the library. The library has not just books by the Iyengars, but newspaper articles about them and all books related to the practice of Iyengar yoga, such as many different versions of the Yoga Sutras or the Upanishads. Students will often go to the library between classes and relax, reading with others.

Where else can I easily visit in India?

Pune is a 3-4 hour drive from Mumbai. The incredible Ajanta and Ellora caves are about 6 hours by car away. Delhi is roughly a 2-hour flight, and from Delhi it is pretty easy to get to Jaipur or Agra and the Taj Mahal. There are many other areas you can drive to for a day trip.

Should I take my spouse or significant other?

My spouse and my adult daughter both ended up traveling to India with me. While I threw myself into the classes and happenings at the Institute, they explored India. If you do everything the Institute offers, there is not a lot of free time to spend with family – basically only Sundays.

If your spouse or family member is interested in studying at the Institute, they do try to accommodate that, but require them to not attend more than one or two weeks of classes. My husband and daughter are both Iyengar yoga students, so were very interested in taking a class at the Institute but were not able to because their travel plans made two weeks in Pune impossible.

How did your time at the Institute change your practice?

In a class with Prashant Iyengar one day, he talked about needing to quiet your mind enough to be deeply aware of the effects of your practice. I won't get the quote exactly right, but he said that you ultimately cannot learn yoga in classes but must learn yoga from within your own body instead.

His words, and the entire experience, have had a profound effect on me and have changed and deepened my practice. Since I've been back, I value my personal practice in a way I didn't necessarily before. I have been able to be more deeply present in my practice. And it has been so fun to try to share a little of what I have learned with my students!

Was once enough?

I loved everything about my trip (well except maybe the 30 hours of travel). In fact, I am already excitedly planning my next trip back.

Raina Fishbane and her daughter Emma Walker, who traveled to India with her

More questions?

Feel free to let me know! I'd love to share more about my experience and help in any way. I can be reached at iyase.pr@gmail.com.

Also Bobby Clemenel, a certified Iyengar Yoga teacher in New York who has traveled to the Institute numerous times since her first trip in 1975, has published an incredible *Pune Guide* that she is currently in the process of updating. The guide can be found at www.bobbyclemenel.com/pune.html

About the author.....

Raina Fishbane is our current IYASE Public Relations Chairperson. She has been practicing Iyengar yoga for about 18 years. Raina had tried many other types of yoga earlier in her life, but never connected with any until her first Iyengar class. She has been studying and practicing Iyengar Yoga ever since.

Raina became a Certified Iyengar Yoga Teacher 3 years ago and teaches both in-person for Sweetbay Yoga in Bethesda, Maryland (www.sweetbayyoga.com) and on Zoom through the online platform, Path of Yoga (www.pathofyoga.net)