

writer CATHARINE NICOL

# where happiness and spirituality meet

**AT FIRST GLANCE** it is clear that Jessie Chapman is the perfect person to lead a yoga retreat. She radiates a calm, friendly peace and beauty that immediately soothes and charms. Very apt, then, that she chose to call her company Radiance Retreats. From her beachside base of Byron Bay in Australia, Jessie has long embraced yoga as a path to happiness and fulfillment, and through her retreats held around the world, helps others do the same. With books, DVDs, a line of yoga wear and numerous glowing testimonials to her name, and living in the hallowed company of her photographer partner Dhyana and young daughter Dakota, Jessie Chapman is living the life that many of us only dream of.

THIS PAGE: Namaste on the beach; OPPOSITE PAGE: Cobra at Huafun Fushi Maldives, both by Dhyana Dennis



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Perhaps it is due to her background that Jessie is so calm, so grounded, such a nurturing personality. “My mum always had the dream of building her own house in a forest,” she says. “She was a radical feminist at the time. She had a vision of living healthily and bringing up her kids in a conscious environment. So she moved from Melbourne to Byron Bay, bought land in the rainforest and took 15 years to build our home, slowly and organically.”

And the conscious living went far beyond bricks and mortar – or rather wood. No electricity, no toilets and not allowed to eat sugar, Jessie and her writer sister Judy grew up living an alternative life of kaftans, holidays in ashrams in India and going to the Australian counter-culture Aquarius Festivals.

High school came as a culture shock – moving from a local school of 24 to nearby town Mullumbimbi’s school of 1000, it took the sisters a while to adapt to their new friends’ conventional lifestyles. “It was a tough adjustment,” she remembers. “Getting along and realising how different the other children were. Before we were living a fairy tale life – fairly hard, but in nature and with a lot of freedom. It was hard to fit into the city mentality and we were embarrassed to bring our friends home.”

Living in such a self-sufficient way did take its toll on Jessie’s mother, however, and suffering from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, she sold the house in the forest and moved into Byron Bay. From one extreme to another, she transformed herself into a web design teacher. Meanwhile, Jessie spent

time in Melbourne at school and studying massage, and then took herself on a three-year trip through Italy and Spain returning to Australia at the age of 21.

#### IT’S ALL ABOUT YOGA

She came back from Europe with a cloud over her usual sunny and surefooted self. “I’d done a lot of travelling, and – well, at that age the world can seem dark and heavy. I was overwhelmed with the reality of war, poverty and corruption and didn’t know what I could do to help. I see this in young teenagers often – they have so much potential to be useful and part of the solution, but they need some kind of guidance on how. They are depressed, thinking, what can they do?”



Yoga was her rescue. When she got home a friend took her to a yoga class lead by an old friend of theirs. “Yes, it was eye opening” she remembers. “Instantaneously I found peace and strength. It was going to be ok. Yoga gave me the tools to strengthen my mind and body.”

It was the mid nineties and Jessie was practicing yoga, sometimes as much as two or three times a day. Byron Bay was a Mecca for all things alternative and teachers travelled through, imparting their experience, which Jessie soaked up like a sponge. The next logical step was for her to do her teacher training course, and the pattern of her life so far was set.

#### TEACHING STRENGTH AND BALANCE

“It is great to be able to create a place for people to relax and retreat – and be at peace. I can be of service when people are needing help. They come for many different reasons and always leave transformed, with clarity and a renewed commitment to living a healthy lifestyle.”

Radiance Retreats are designed by Jessie to be deeply healing for all levels and all ages.

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While most of her retreats focus on Vinyasa yoga, with strengthening postures and breathing in the mornings and restora-

tive sessions of postures, yoga nidra and meditation in the afternoon, she also places an emphasis on walking, to clear the mind, and massage.

When at home in Byron she conducts her retreats at resorts such as Gaia Retreat & Spa, where her weeks include modalities like reiki too. “With all the yoga practice and stepping away from one’s everyday life, life issues do come up sometimes, but it’s healthy and a retreat is the perfect place to clean out on all levels.” She also holds retreats at Koh Samui’s Kamalaya Spa and Wellness Retreat, Bali’s spiritual hill town of Ubud and new this year, at the Chateau Robert in France.

“The strongest experiences have come from my time in Bali. It is an incredible place to be, and you can really feel that this is how they live their life, with such deep connection. And Byron Bay is a great place to explore the self and facilitate change, personal development and healing.”

#### THE NEXT GENERATION

When pregnant with her daughter Dakota, now two years old, Jessie followed one of her own retreats. “For the first three months I hardly did any yoga,” she says. “I just practiced relaxing asanas as I’d had a miscarriage before. During my second trimester I practiced regularly and as Dakota was so strong I did deeply strengthening and relaxing pre-natal yoga. I had very strong abs and pelvic floor already and had to let go and soften all that.”

Adapting her practice specifically for her pregnancy paid off. “I had the easiest,

most incredible birth with just three hours of labour. Dakota didn’t cry, she arrived clean and peaceful. It was all about knowing how to breathe into the pain, as yoga teaches you. Acknowledge it and sink into it.”

And it’s hardly surprising to hear that Dakota is the Chapman family’s newest yoga fan. “I was anxious that I’d have to change that part of my life, but Dakota loved yoga from day one. She loves the ritual and energy about it, and she’s very strong and physical. This generation will grow up with yoga from the womb.”

#### KEEPING IT SIMPLE

As so often when children enter one’s life, priorities change as much as the everyday pattern of reality. For Jessie, now being healthy is her highest priority. “Since Dakota I haven’t been as fanatical,” she admits. “I was vegetarian but as I had a low BMI I started eating fish. I’ve always been healthy, with plenty of exercise and sleep and a happy state of mind.”

While she doesn’t claim high spiritual status, it is hard to dismiss the impression of clear and pure spirituality that glows out of her. So comfortably at home in one of Australia’s most healing places, and within such a happy and relaxed home life, if not spirituality, this is what pure, raw happiness looks like.

“My goals are about honouring where I am at the moment, rather than about getting anywhere else in the future,” she says. “And through asanas it’s about what’s right for me now. Not having an expectation, more a meditation, keeping still in mind and body and going deep into that space, cultivating compassion, inner peace and truth. Sometimes I get glimpses of a sense of oneness – a heaven on earth experience, a flowing. I’m not a deep spiritual guide, for me it’s the here and now, the practicality of finding happiness. It’s a journey.”

#### books

Yoga Postures for your Body Mind & Soul  
Yoga for Inner Strength  
Yoga Sequences for your Body, Mind & Soul  
Partner Yoga for your Body, Mind & Soul

#### dvds

Radiance Yoga  
Vinyasa Yoga Strength & Balance (Aug 2008)  
Vinyasa Yoga Stretch & Open (Sept 2008)

#### clothing

to.be yoga wear  
[www.radianceretreats.com](http://www.radianceretreats.com)

ABOVE: XXX pose by the pool, Huwafen Fushi Maldives, by Dhyana Dennis