

## Anusara on the Equator

By Jennifer New

Heartland teacher Rachel Klapper joined John Friend, the founder of the Anusara school of yoga, for a six-day trip to Ecuador in November. Klapper, who is currently applying for her Anusara-Inspired license, had studied with Friend on three other occasions, but in larger groups. "John is an amazing teacher. You feel his attention even in a group of 800," she says of her experience of practicing with him at a Yoga Journal conference.



Still, she wanted the same experience that had been common to Anusara students and teachers a decade ago—a hands-on experience with Friend. She kept returning to [Anusara's web site](#), which features the many trips Friend leads every year with his so-called Merry Band. The chance to be among twenty students accompanying him on his first trip to South America was irresistible.

Anusara, which means "flowing with grace," is epitomized by its celebration of the heart. After having studied various forms of hatha yoga for about a decade, Rachel took her first Anusara class with Marsha Nieland in Cedar Rapids in 2007. She was so impressed, that she brought her husband with her for a second class, which was focused on backbends.

"We were facing a very challenging situation in our lives at that time," says Rachel. "Afterwards on the way home, we turned to each other and remarked that we felt the first real sense of joy that we had had in a very long time. What I found as I continued to explore the style was that the heart opening we felt that night and the opening I felt in my very first class with Marsha are built into the Anusara method."

One of the fastest growing yoga styles today, Anusara's success is no doubt due not only to the joy experienced by Rachel and her husband, but also by Friend's charismatic personality. "John's classes are a celebration of the heart and the human experience," says Rachel, "in which he skillfully guides every student into a deeper expression of themselves."

Unlike the serious guru one might expect from a seasoned yogi who leads thousands of practitioners, Rachel says that Friend is also wonderfully goofy. The 20 travelers on the trip did handstands everywhere they went, including on the equator. The handstand is Friend's favorite pose, so even the tour's bus driver got used to spotting spontaneous hand stands.

During the first four days, the group explored small town markets, met with an indigenous herbalist, soaked in hot springs, and hiked near some of the country's dozens of volcanoes. The trip culminated with a two-day workshop in the capital city of Quito with more than a hundred participants, many of whom had come from all over South America. Anusara is already well-established in Europe, Asia and Australia, but this is the first wave in South America.

For the past two years, Rachel has been working towards her Anusara-Inspired license, a prerequisite to entering the teaching certification program. The trip allowed Rachel to log hours toward her certification, which she hopes to complete in the next two to three years. One of the most challenging, and time-intensive certification processes in American yoga, Anusara requires years of personal practice (in asana and seated meditation) and public teaching, 500 hours of studies (in eastern philosophy and yoga history, biomechanics, anatomy, detailed postural alignment, therapeutics, and the art of teaching yoga), and required reading. Then a candidate undergoes an evaluation by Friend and members of the certification committee, who look at asana performance, teaching skills, and overall knowledge of yoga through a written exam.



Returning to Heartland, Rachel's first classes were full of new teaching ideas she'd gained both from Friend and her fellow travelers, many of whom are teachers in other parts of the world. (As one of her students, let me say that she was positively glowing!) "I always return from a workshop with John or one of the other senior teachers with a renewed sense of why we do this practice of yoga, and why I want to share it with others—to reveal our inner essence. When we do this, our hearts open and we are more skillfully able to add love and beauty to the world."