

EVEN HELEMAAL VRIJ OP PAROS

Yogadocente Oona Giesen overleefde een ernstig auto-ongeluk, maar kon zeven jaar lang niet zitten van de pijn. De lessen die ze toen leerde, brengt ze nu over op haar leerlingen op het idyllische Griekse eiland Paros. Bureauirecteur Maartje Verhoeven bezocht haar, en kwam zichzelf tegen. [Foto: Maartje Verhoeven, 2012, www.paros.nl](#)



COMPLETE FREEDOM ON PAROS

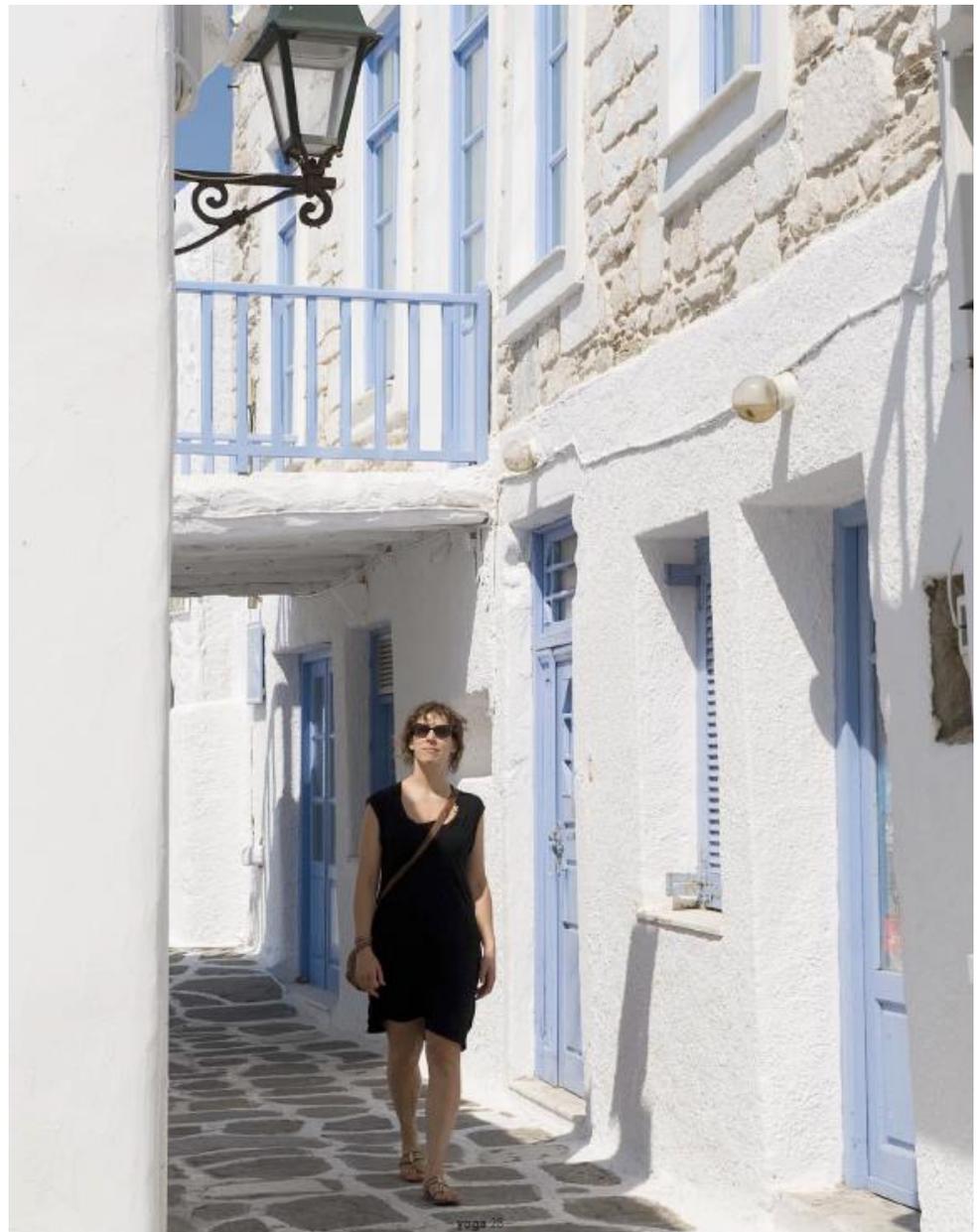
Oona Giesen, yoga coach, survived a serious accident, but because of the pain she felt, she was unable to sit down for 7 years. The lessons she learned then, she now passes on to her pupils on the idyllic Greek island of Paros. General editor Maartje Verhoeven visited her and tried to come to terms with her own shortcoming.

Story: Maartje Verhoeven,
Pictures: Bonnita Postma
Translated by Nora Wakim

People who practise yoga are always looking for something, aren't they, photographer Bonnita says to me in the plane. I think she is probably right. I am also a searching soul, looking for the essence of my being. I make myself do so much. And because of that I often feel frustrated, scared of really following what my heart tells me. Yoga helps me, has already helped me a lot in the last couple of years of discovering myself.

I am looking forward to this trip because we are going to practise yoga. I love its precision and alignment. In Paros a milder and more personal variety is practised than Iyengar himself prescribed and in the photo's I saw a small altar in the yoga hall. Good, because I also like a bit of philosophy and spirituality now and then.

A warm soft island breeze caresses my arms and legs. At the airport - the size of a living-room - our yoga teacher/coach Oona Giessen is already waiting for us. Together with a small blonde boy, her son Thomas. After a small tour in the fishing-village of Aliko she takes us to our hotel. All my other senses are stimulated by the sweet scent of jasmine and the deep red colour of the bougainville which grows in abundance over the recently painted white walls. Paros is indeed a paradise. I can relax here.



Oona has been living on the island for ten years and has been practising yoga for a long time. Her earliest lessons were given her by her mother Jeanne Buntinx "She is one of those real old hippies" Oona tells us. She was one of the first to come to the guru Iyengar in India to learn yoga and received his blessing to start giving lessons herself. At eight years old I already accompanied her to her Amsterdam yoga-school.

Here in Paros the first yoga-lesson starts at nine-thirty in the morning – what a luxury. "Yes, here in Paros everybody sleeps a lot" Oona says "and it is of course my pupils' holiday." Well, then I can go jogging before the lessons start, I think fanatically.

THE PHILOSOPHER

As I walk down the marble steps in the morning . a hoarsely meowing cat comes along. As if he were my bodyguard. I will find him every morning in front of my door when I emerge. In the breakfast room I hear cheerful violin music and melancholy piano-music. Freshly picked apricots and oranges are lying on the tables I prepare my Greek yoghurt with honey and put it on the checked tablecloth I feel like I am playing in the French movie 'Amelie' – but the Greek version of it.



"THE YOGA LESSONS ONLY START AT NINE THIRTY – FANATICALLY I THINK I CAN GO JOGGING BEFORE THAT."

I chat with Michalis, the extremely caring owner of the hotel. He likes talking about Greek philosophy – I have nicknamed him 'the philosopher' – and about everything going wrong in the world. People no longer communicate. They are too busy and drift away from their souls, he says. I agree with him, at home I am in the midst of a renovation and I was also very busy at work preparing this trip. Then sometimes I seem to lose contact with others, human warmth, sharing things with others. That makes me very sad.

Michalis is from a famous Greek musical family, which explains his good taste in music. Extraordinary people seem to have a predilection for settling in Paros, There are many artists, poets and musicians. Sometimes you suddenly hear guitar music on the beach and you see a few old men playing and enjoying themselves. Life is taken as it comes here and is enjoyed.

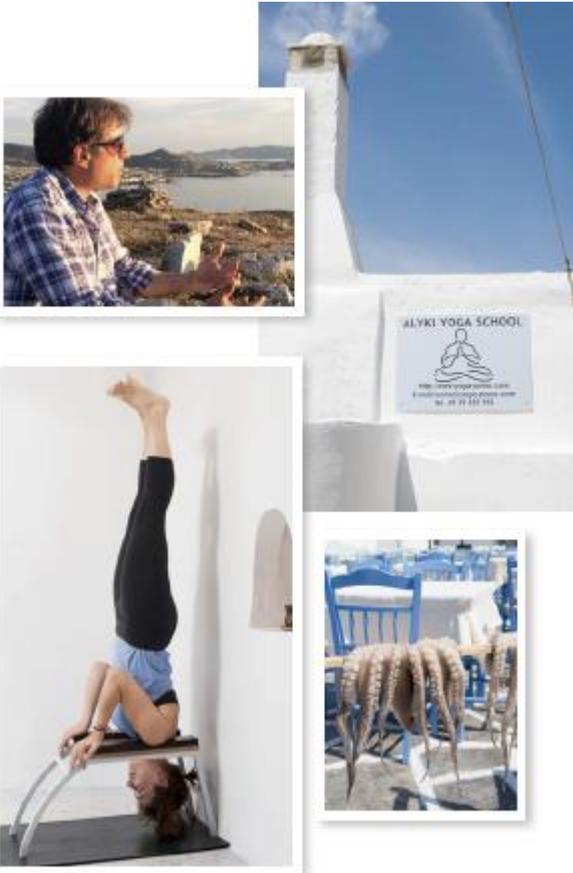


Boven: Oona met Thomas
Rechts: Oona kreeg als meisje al yogales van haar moeder

Left middle: Oona with her son Thomas
Left down: Oona as a young girl doing yoga

LIFE-SAVING YOGA

"This used to be a goat-stable" Oona says when we are in her studio. Now there are modern yoga-swings hanging from the bamboo ceiling. It is nice and cool for the walls are at least 30 inches (a meter) thick and the granite floor feels cool .- nice in such a hot country. I feel no competitiveness in the lesson , you must not expect your positions to be one hundred percent perfect. You do not have to be able to perform the most difficult yoga-exercises. As long as you practise yoga. Practise, every day if possible. And learn to feel your body, "That's what's important" Oona says. This saved her own life. She had been coming to Paros for years to give yoga-lessons in the summer. In the autumn of 1998 everything changed. The first rain fell, the road became extremely slippery and Oona's jeep slipped and came off the road. It somersaulted seven times "I was conscious of feeling my lungs and the space within."



Up: Michalis hotel owner.
Down: Maartje up side down

**“DON’T EXPECT YOURSELF TO BE PERFECT” OONA SAYS
“TO FEEL YOUR BODY, THAT IS THE ESSENCE”.**

WHERE ARE THE STORIES?

But still I miss something. In the lessons I follow in Amsterdam, myths, wise lessons from the Yoga-sutra’s, are interwoven. They help me. On the one hand I enjoy the relaxation given by this yoga, on the other hand it frustrates me that nothing else is happening. While others leave the hall talking enthusiastically and still enjoying the lesson, I just feel... nothing. I get impatient. I had hoped for more. I ask Oona whether it is a conscious choice she makes to use very little philosophy in the lesson. “Such things as acting without using violence and doing good to others are really quite self-evident” ,she says. “After my accident this feeling only increased. I am so grateful to everybody on the island, my friends. They helped pay for my operations and even organised blood donor-parties so as to help me collect samples of my rare blood-group O. During that time I wanted to do something to improve the world every day. I fed stray dogs or helped an old lady cross the road and then accompanied her home as well. “Be happy with what you do have” became my motto. I had to think this to keep myself standing, in letter and thought. For seven years she could not sit down because of the pain, but she did practise yoga every day. In Amsterdam I was in the pubs every day, loved the busy city-life, but I discovered this was no help in my revalidation. I needed calm surroundings. Space to maintain the discipline of exercising. I decided to spend not only the summers in Paros, but to settle here.

She is so strong and accepts herself completely. She could not have told me a better story. To be happy with what you do have. Yes, it’s as simple as that. This is freedom.

GROUPDISCUSSIONS

Twice we eat a wonderful traditional Greek meal with the group. Intense discussions are started around the table. An English psychologist and a Scottish teacher are both taking a sabbatical year “Perhaps we will come and live here” they say. We discuss our longing for simplicity, more intense pleasures, more mindfulness, for yourself and others, vis-s-vis nature and also our own character. Real searching-soul discussions, I say to myself. “Yes” the beautiful Greek Marialena cries full of passion.” I do not

I felt that my left lung had collapsed. By using my breathing techniques I succeeded in pushing air into my lungs again. The fact that she was able to walk into the hospital on her own two legs was actually impossible because one of her vertebrae was shattered All her internal organs were damaged and she had lost a lot of blood. Nobody, even the doctors, believed she could survive. But thanks to her trained yoga-body, extensive operations and a long revalidation process, she did. She invented her own yoga-exercises to strengthen her body. Her physiotherapist hardly had to add anything to her own exercises. Due to her accident she understood how important it is to feel and understand your own body and this is what she wants to teach her pupils.

We start the lesson with a simple breathing exercise. Oona gives us the time to connect with our own internal world and I can feel my breath streaming into my body. The lesson runs smoothly, all exercises are performed with mindfulness. I am slightly astonished when I discover that I have not yet produced one drop of sweat after two and a half hours. This is different from the strenuous Vinyasana’s I am used to, in fact it is one long meditation. And Oona notices everything and corrects us marvelously.

We are leaning forward over a bolster in the Child position. “Now bring your breath broadly into your flanks” she says.’ She checks everybody and pushes her hand firmly into my side – Ah there! It feels good to make that stressy part of my back very broad. It is like a massage just by breathing. Suddenly I feel tears, which stream over my pillow. I feel space. What a release! I can let go of tensions, I do not for the moment need to do anything. The first layer of skin is peeled from the onion, I think. I decide to leave my jogging-shoe’s where they are for the rest of the week.



Oona legt een
stok langs onze
ruggen: 'Voel
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need much money, I want to be in nature, enjoy life, sit on top of the mountain." (You want to see Marialena? She is on the cover of this issue!). For a moment I find myself ordinary, inhibited. Am I too scared to make such a choice? But do I really want my life to be like Marialena's? Why do I tell myself I have to be like that? And then I remember what Oona said. I am happy. Look at me in this wonderful spot just doing my amazing job.

If Michalis feels like it, he will take you at the end of the day to the most beautiful place on the island, the mountain. "Look, this is the place with the most earth-rays, that is why the temple was built here. In Greek philosophy, everything consists of energy." I listen carefully. We call Michalis our guru and we are his disciples and laugh about it. But when the sun is at its most beautiful and sinks into the sea, we are silent for a while I feel connected to everybody. Real contact in silence.

CREATING SPACE

Because of the relaxation achieved by the yoga-lessons space and calm are created in my spirit. I think less often that I am obliged to this or that. I have to be nice to everybody all the time. Even if I do not feel like it. Meanwhile I am nice, just by being myself. I feel happy, I shine. The stories I missed in my lessons, I now find all around me.

Literally space is also being created between my vertebrae, because that is the essence of Oona's lessons. "Lengthening the spinal chord in all positions is the base. All our nerves are found here. In this way you supply them with oxygen and nutrition. She touches us all with a long stick which she places on our backs. "Feel how upright your spinal chord is now. At a certain moment your body remembers the position. Remember this stick in your back in future in all positions and correct your attitude." I feel stronger physically and more self-assured.

On the last day I feel restless and suddenly a heavy storm is raging. The small plane which will take me away from the island, cannot land. For a while I feel lost, the space has gone. I have to get home, there is so much to do, I have to get back to work. The flights for the rest of the week are fully booked, unless you are lucky. Then possibly they may take you along tomorrow morning", everybody says. Okay Maartje, use your yoga and stay confident. Michalis comforts me and says "Don't worry about your stay tonight. "Everybody is so nice to me." The island wants to keep you here, is there more you want to learn", Anna, Oona's best friend jokes.

Next morning I visualise the stick behind my back. I stand up straight with an open attitude and I see a strong woman reflected in myself. Just as beautiful as Marialena. Happy with what I have, full of space and inspiration from Oona's lessons, Michalis' stories...One minute before the plane leaves for Athens, I hear that I can go along. Yes!

I stay for one night in Athens, because I have a flight back home the next day, I sit down in a sidewalk cafe by myself. The young Greek waiter is charming. I see his Om-tattoo in his neck. I ask him about it. "I believe in Oneness, we are all one", he says. This simple, inspiring encounter I also gratefully take back home with me.

OONA PUTS A STICK ALONG OUR BACKS. "FEEL HOW STRAIGHT YOUR BACK IS NOW"

