

SHIFT YOUR VISION

Surviving and thriving at Baron Baptiste's
Personal Revolution Bootcamp in Tulum, Mexico

BY NANCY REYNOLDS BAGLEY

I heard the questions...

"Are you ready to unlock your body's limitless potential, balance your emotions and master your diet?" ...Well, yes.

"Are you committed to reaching a new altitude of physical and spiritual strength?" ... Sure.

There I was in the back corner of class, holding on to whatever it is inside that gets you through something like this. My thighs were shaking, as I wavered on one leg in a pool of my own sweat — what am I doing here? And how am I going to make it through the rest of this week? ... It was 9:30 a.m. and I was only thirty minutes into my first class of bootcamp. Yes, yoga bootcamp.

That was four years ago. Then, I could barely get through a 90 minute class, but something happened on the third day. I felt lighter, younger and happier than I had in years.

And now, having finished my third bootcamp, I can say that the experience is magical—I'm hooked—and the changes I have seen in myself and in others are incredible.

To some, a week-long yoga retreat at an exotic beachfront location brings visions of breathing exercises, gentle stretching, and perhaps sitting cross-legged chanting om. But modern yogi Baron Baptiste sees his Personal Revolution Bootcamp in a different light: an opportunity to transform, reject old habits and start anew.

I quit smoking. Others gave up coffee and alcohol. My husband, Soroush lost 15 pounds and lowered his blood pressure and cholesterol dramatically. A father and his daughter we met repaired their broken relationship. Insomnia was cured. Relationships were strengthened and self-worth replenished.

Although the bootcamp does take place in the paradisiacal Maya Tulum eco-resort in Tulum, Mexico, don't let images of a Caribbean sanctuary deceive you. With Baptiste leading the way, this "Eden" becomes the land of sweat.

Baptiste, a best-selling author, father, educator, and entrepreneur is not afraid of hard work and neither are the people who flock to his bootcamps and yoga studios. As the week went on, I came to discover that I was swapping stories with CEOs, entertainment personalities, attorneys, bankers, publishers, — all eager to put their frenetic lives aside for a week of renewal. Whether you're a "Type A" looking to decompress or a devoted student looking to strengthen your practice, it doesn't matter. There are no labels or castes; the focus is only on the transformational benefits for those willing to open-up and suspend doubts.

Just as I was ready to admit defeat and beg mercy from master teacher and bootcamp facilitator Gregor Singleton, Baptiste walks into the steam-filled yoga bungalow whistling, "don't worry be happy." It's hard not to notice his taut surfer/martial arts/yogi physique as he tells us to hold the pose longer! "Shift your vision and use your breath to quiet the negative self-chatter." He was right; the battle was indeed in my head.

Therein lies Baptiste's philosophy. Engaging



Title page: Baron Baptiste in crow position. Clockwise from top left: a beach-side Maya Tulum cabana, but the resort's best room is on the rock outcrop in the distance; Participants at the 8-day personal revolution bootcamp; A view from the main lodge at Maya Tulum; Baron's approach is hands on.



your physical body allows you to tap into your mental, emotional side — your spiritual self. The physical challenge of his form of yoga focuses on the present and inspires personal transformation. Basically he short-circuits your nervous system and then rebuilds it. “When I can get you out of your own way, then I can do what I need to do to access new thresholds of growth.... Drop what you know and allow your old self to come apart. Your body and mind will create balance and a new way of being.”

In eight days the Personal Revolution Bootcamp does just that. It brings your mind, body, and spirit into harmony using aerobic power yoga sessions to awaken and internally rinse the body, meditation and discussion to level emotional imbalances and a healthful organic diet to further detoxify and purify. “We try to expose the self-defeating system that is ingrained in every one of us,” says Singleton, “you can’t entirely get rid of it, but you can be aware as you take it with you.”

With Baptiste, a challenging yoga practice is the spark which can ignite personal transformation.

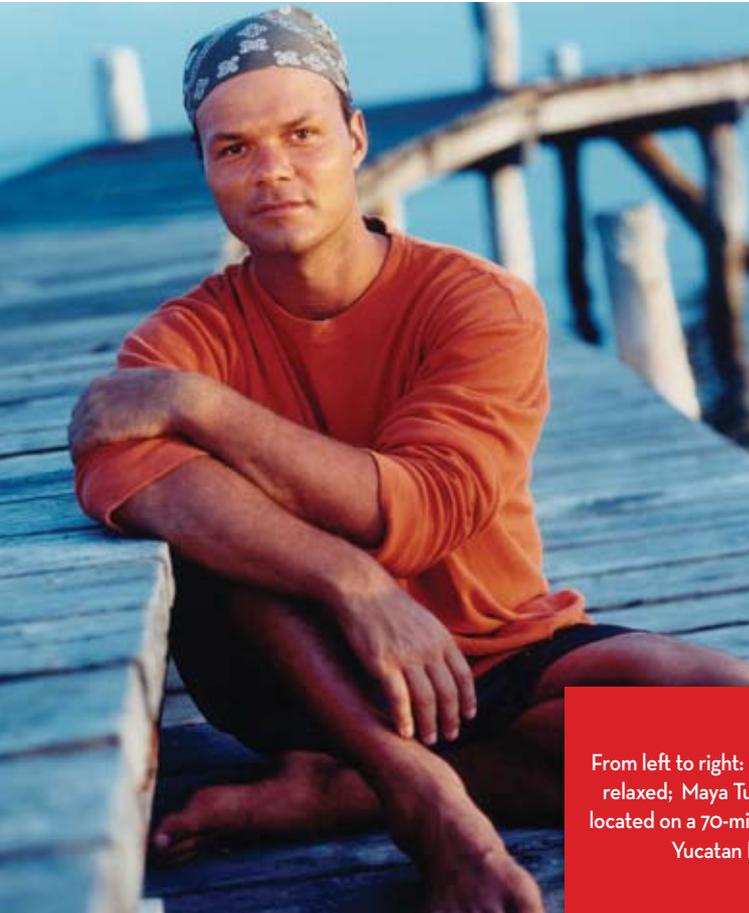
The heat of Bikram, the discipline of Ashtanga, the alignment of Iyengar, and the strength-building asanas (postures) of all three inform his own unique tradition: Baptiste PowerVinyasa Yoga. “He created his own style of yoga in order to make it more accessible and beneficial to westerners,” explains Siga Bielkus, program director for the Baptiste PowerYoga Institute (“BPYI”).

Born into a yoga dynasty, his father Walt Baptiste was one of the first to promote a holistic type of “Integral” yoga in the United States, pioneering fitness training and nutrition. Together with Baron’s mother, Magana (niece of a former president of El Salvador), they opened the first yoga studio in San Francisco in 1955. Baron basically grew up at the knees of several legendary yogis — B.K.S. Iyengar, K. Pattabhi Jois, and Bikram Choudhury. Their traditional and

sometimes rigid approach helped him realize that the practice of yoga needed to be de-mystified and tailored to the American mind and body.

Back then yoga could be a bit cultish. “Even in California, I was teased a lot and called a ‘Hare Krishna ... But it’s funny how life finds you ... the last thing I wanted to do is teach,” explains Baptiste, who started teaching at his parents studio at age fifteen. In his early twenties, he worked as one of two teachers at Bikram’s Beverly Hills studio where he helped design a teacher-training program and became somewhat of a yogi to the stars, teaching Raquel Welch, Quincy Jones, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Martin Sheen and Herbie Hancock. Since then, his celebrity students have included quarterback Randall Cunningham, actresses Elizabeth Shue and Helen Hunt, and singer Chynna Phillips.

“DROP WHAT YOU KNOW AND ALLOW YOUR OLD SELF TO COME APART. YOUR BODY AND MIND WILL CREATE BALANCE AND A NEW WAY OF BEING.” -BARON BAPTISTE



From left to right: Baron feeling more relaxed; Maya Tulum eco-resort is located on a 70-mile stretch along the Yucatan Peninsula;

Baptiste also witnessed his father unmask the hypocrisy of certain other self-proclaimed Eastern gurus who frequented his family's home. "At some point, I realized that I needed to pursue my own path," says Baptiste, 42, who has spent the past two decades introducing his own revolutionary style to many who might never have been naturally drawn to yoga. His approach makes the benefits of yoga available to everyone: young, old, the athlete, the yoga virgin, or the master instructor. His system is based on the fundamentals of sound sequencing, sound biomechanics, and specific alignments which are safe and healthy for the body's design. "Westerners aren't really used to sitting on the floor cross-legged from birth," Baptiste explains. "Since our hips are tighter we benefit from a more tailored approach adapted to meet the needs of each individual's level of strength, coordination, flexibility, and agility."

"The camps are always filled to capacity, with students ranging in age from 14 to 70, many coming by themselves others with partners or family," says Vyda Bielkus, director of BPYI. As I can attest, the process supports people at all fitness and health levels (I could barely touch my toes at

my first camp). "For some, yoga is viewed as the exclusive realm of crunchy-granola hippies but what has attracted people to Baptiste's style is the physical challenge and feeling of empowerment," says Patty Ivey, owner of Baptiste's only D.C. affiliate studio, Down Dog Yoga, in Georgetown. A marathoner and bootcamp veteran, Ivey fell into yoga as a result of knee injuries. "Yoga dramatically helped my physical recovery," she says. "The Baptiste practice is a dynamic combination of sweat, strength and intuitive self discovery with opportunities for anyone willing to take on physical and emotional barriers."

A lot of people say, "I've tried yoga, and I don't like it," but to me that is like saying, I've tried bananas and I don't like fruit. I had heard about the rehabilitative effects of yoga from acquaintances such as publisher Mort Zuckerman who told me that he visited some of the best specialists in the world for severe back pain until yoga finally relieved him. My husband and I started practicing Jivamukti yoga in New York in the '90s and thought it was the only yoga we would ever love. Since then we have practiced Bikram and Ashtanga, but it was the Baptiste flow which really fired our

spirits again. Like us, many are drawn to yoga for its remarkable physical health benefits or perhaps the ability to make your bottom look perky in a bikini. But most become hooked because of the effect on their overall quality of life.

"Yoga is not something that gets done to you," says Singleton, "it takes commitment to glean the benefits." But a Baptiste bootcamp is probably the only vacation you will take where you won't need another upon return.

South of Cancun, bordered by the blue-green ocean on one side and tropical rainforest on the other, the Maya Tulum eco-resort isn't the "camp" we knew as kids. Quaint, thatched-roof bungalows dot the endless white sand beach. The beachfront huts offer spectacular views, calm ocean breezes, and an audible murmur from the glassy waves. The spa/massage staff is incredible, (and I am very picky).

Our morning regimen begins with 6:30 a.m. meditation followed by a brisk hour-long walk or jog down the beach. After a healthy light breakfast it's time to hit the mat...

A group of 80 strangers quickly forms a community as we fill the yoga bungalow, lining up our mats. The unified hum of *ujjayi* breath parallels the sound of rolling ocean waves. Our bodies pulse with energy as we flow from one posture to the next pushing ourselves to the physical edge determined to live and feel more fully.

Cultivating a sense of "authenticity" is what Baptiste is all about. "You cannot do wrong in one aspect of your life and expect to do right

EVERYONE HAS A SYSTEM THAT IS RESISTANT TO CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION

We are not really open to change if we go through life simply looking to reaffirm our existing beliefs. And we are not really listening if we hear and categorize every comment based on whether we "agree or don't agree." That's just our "system" trying to maintain the status quo.

in any of the others. They are all interconnected, integral," he says." But Baptiste doesn't preach or claim to be a guru or a grand master. He admits that he is a "flawed man," yet he is real, very real. Humor seeps from his pores. He tells story after story and enjoys quoting his favorite mentors, including Gandhi, Shakespeare and Jesus. He simply shares his philosophy on yoga and life, and lets you decide what to take from it.

"Mixing up the physical practice with dialogue sessions is not therapy," he explains, but rather a forum for encouraging us to re-evaluate self-destructive behaviors. "First we make our habits and then our habits make us," says Baron. The notion that "you know who you are, but not what you could be" is another key "Baronsim," explains Georgetown, repeat bootcamper and Down Dog instructor Ronnie Jerky. "I find it liberating, and with liberation comes the rise to full potential," she says.

I was hesitant to participate at first. I am not one who likes speaking in public. But as others opened up to share, I, too, realized how liberating it could be. According to Baptiste, stress and bottled-up feelings of betrayal, anger, jealousy, hatred or neglect can create acidity and disease. The lie cages us.

"Life is full of problems," he says, "if you don't have any, it is because you are dead. The key is how you choose to react. Be grateful for your problems and shift your vision."

Baptiste can speak from personal experience. He credits yoga with helping him overcoming a life-crippling back injury sustained when he was crushed on the sidelines while serving as peak performance coach for the Philadelphia Eagles as well as with helping him amicably settle a divorce with his wife of 8 years, essentially without attorneys. Yoga focuses an active professional life, that requires him to spend hundreds of days per year on the road, writing and touring for his books, teaching at studios, workshops and bootcamps and "balancing that with a rock-solid commitment to my three kids," says Baptiste.

"Bring yoga into your everyday life," Baptiste says. "You can't expect stress and chaos to go away, but yoga is a way to manage it" It's the physical push which helps peel away the layers enveloping your true self.

With physical and emotional changes already well underway by mid-week, Baptiste introduces the final aspect of the Personal Revolution

2006 CABANA RATES		
WINTER (NOV 4TH-JUNE 2ND) - SUMMER (JUNE 3RD-NOV 3RD)		
GARDEN VIEW	\$145	\$105
OCEAN VIEW	\$145-\$155	\$105-\$115
BEACHFRONT	\$185-\$200	\$145-\$160
OCEAN VIEW	\$145-\$155	\$105-\$115
BEACHFRONT	\$185-\$200	\$145-\$160

Bootcamp — detoxification from the inside out. The first time, I was terrified. I love my food and a glass of wine at night. Wednesday through Friday we ate only low-sugar fruit: avocado, tomato, melon, mango, papaya,— the three-day fruit fast wrung out my organs like a sponge. I expected to drag, considering that we were on our mats six hours a day and consuming only fruit and water, but to my surprise, my energy soared. It was so easy.

Baptiste describes his yoga practice as an "unlearning process." The bootcamp — the asana practice, the meditations and discussions, and the detox diet — are all about letting go he says. "If you can let go of the excess, you are naturally healthy, you can get rid of the toxins, whether they are physical or emotional, the body is naturally strong. "No matter how long and how far you walk down the wrong path, turn back."

My husband, his brother, and cousin, and I enrolled in the bootcamp to share healthy time together and take a holiday from our hectic lives. I've seen some couples show up with a wall between them and leave with a much deeper connection. Others send a partner to share a life experience, hoping to develop a common language of growth. Marylanders Heather and Sid McNairy have attended two bootcamps. "The first was our honeymoon and we had no idea that we would be building our marriage," said Sid, who now runs the "I Do Yoga" studio in Maryland with his wife.

Regardless of the reason that any of us each initially enrolled, we all had one thing in common — intention. We were all seekers. We all wanted to live more fully, to be whole.

"What's next?" Baron inquired, grinning on the last day of camp. "And what good is your transformation if you're not willing to share it?"

"Be the change you want to see in the world," he says quoting Gandhi.

What an incredible gift to give yourself — and others. **WL**



MAYA TULUM'S ECO-RESORT

Put an end to the "Cancun is for spring break" stereotype

THE LOCATION:

Located just a half-hour drive south of Cancun International Airport, along the 70-mile stretch of Yucatan peninsula.

THE DRAW:

This 25-acre seaside yoga retreat invites you to trade in your usual gin and tonic for tequila and tamarind juice, your tired dance moves for a full lotus, and your flip-flops for, well, nothing. Oh, and topless sunbathing, of course.

THE ROOMS:

Round cabanas with thatched roofs and marble floors come with an open shower, a personalized sitting area, and bottled water. The yoga room's open roof offers reprieve from even the most challenging of poses with a soothing view of Mexico's turquoise sky.

WHAT TO DO:

Yoga classes are offered twice daily, from beginner to advanced, for only \$10 per class. Eco-adventure tours explore the "Tulum Ruins," the only Mayan site found along the sea. At the spa, your most stressful moments will be deciding between a Swedish or a hot stone massage. Dive the Cenotes, amazing freshwater caverns. Over the past 20 years, divers have discovered more than 300 miles of interconnected passageways and caves.

WHERE TO EAT:

After you play, re-fuel at the retreats open air restaurant, with dishes such as grouper filet Mayan style wrapped in a banana leaf for the gastronomically curious, to fish and papaya tacos, for those who prefer the more familiar.