



WUSHU WARRIOR

Tai chi's graceful hand movements
can change in an instant into powerful
punches. Its name means
"supreme ultimate fist."



Tai Chi Me

Casting aside the yoga of her youth, **Shoba Narayan** turns to China's martial arts to tame her wild emotions—"I'm more Rahm Emanuel than Barack Obama"—and get six-pack abs in the bargain

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **José Picayo**
ILLUSTRATIONS BY **Peter Oumanski**

TAI CHI POSES DEMONSTRATED
BY **Dr. Nan Lu**



I

HAVE COME to China from my home in Bangalore, India, to find a tai chi teacher.

I arrive in Shanghai at night, alone, and decide to go to the movies. Neon lights flash by the taxi's windows as the driver listens to mournful Chinese music. We pass buses full of commuters on their way home. The theater is almost empty, but the movie—Michelle Yeoh's latest martial arts adventure, *Reign of Assassins*—is breathtaking. Watching her dispense would-be killers with praying mantis strikes and *wing chun* kicks reminds me that Yeoh is heir to a long line of women in Chinese martial arts, something the feminist in me relishes. The earliest reference I've found comes from the Zhou period, around 700 B.C., when a young woman, Yuh Niuy, defeated three thousand men in a sword battle lasting seven days. Yuh's sayings have been passed down the centuries. "When the way is battle," she wrote, "be full-spirited within, but outwardly show calm and be relaxed. Appear to be as gentle as a fair lady, but react like a vicious tiger." I sleep well in my hotel that night.

The next morning I jog to the Bund. At 6 A.M. it is quiet, a far cry from night, when throngs of people gather to gawk at the Oriental Pearl Tower and the

lights of Pudong. Dawn brings runners like myself, plus dog walkers, photographers, kite-flying men. In the plaza across from The Peninsula hotel, several groups "play" tai chi, as the Chinese say, dressed in cream-colored satin uniforms, wielding swords and fans to strike poses such as "embrace the moon" and "cloud hands." They are magnificent, crouching low to crawl like a snake and doing "golden cock stands on one leg." A black-uniformed teacher breaks off occasionally to adjust a stance, demonstrate a parry, and correct a form.

During a water break, I sidle up to a young man whose explosive *fa-jin* punches—ones that begin fast, then stop abruptly—almost make me weep with envy. "Does your *shifu* [teacher] speak English?" I ask.

I don't understand his words, but it's clear that the answer is no.

My pursuit of tai chi has been punctuated by such cultural challenges. When I informed my conservative Indian family that I was interested in tai chi, they were appalled. Why was their Indian child, heir to an ancient and proud tradition—yoga—leaning toward an alien discipline? "I told you that sending her to America was a bad idea," said my uncle, who made me do the downward dog every day as a child. He was right. It was as a young woman abroad in America that I'd found myself bumping up against China's culture: a Chinese roommate, an apprenticeship with an acupuncturist while awaiting my green card, Bette Bao Lord's novels. Yoga is like my mother; I take it for granted. It is so much a part of me that I am tired of it. I want some distance. Tai chi offers this distance while still being based on the Eastern principles familiar to me.

I am here, in tai chi's birthplace, to try to take my practice to the next level. Like many modern practitioners of tai chi, I don't have the free time to spend weeks at one of the intensive martial arts schools in the provinces of China because of work and family responsibilities. Instead, I have seven days. And so I've made appointments with tai chi teachers in Shanghai and Beijing. My tai chi teacher in India, who travels frequently to China, tried to manage my expectations. "My teachers cannot be yours," he said. "Go forth and find your own."

Having turned forty, I no longer aspire to become a crouching tiger or a hidden dragon. Yes, I want the core strength, flexibility, and balance that tai chi provides. But I also want serenity. Temperamentally I am more Rahm Emanuel than Barack Obama. I hear myself interacting with my family, issuing threats to my daughters that I have no hope of keeping ("Clean your room or no TV for a month") and subjecting my even-keeled engineer husband to ultimatums ("This is not working—I am leaving"). With tai chi, I can channel my frustrations into black tiger kicks, dragon fists, and eagle claw holds.

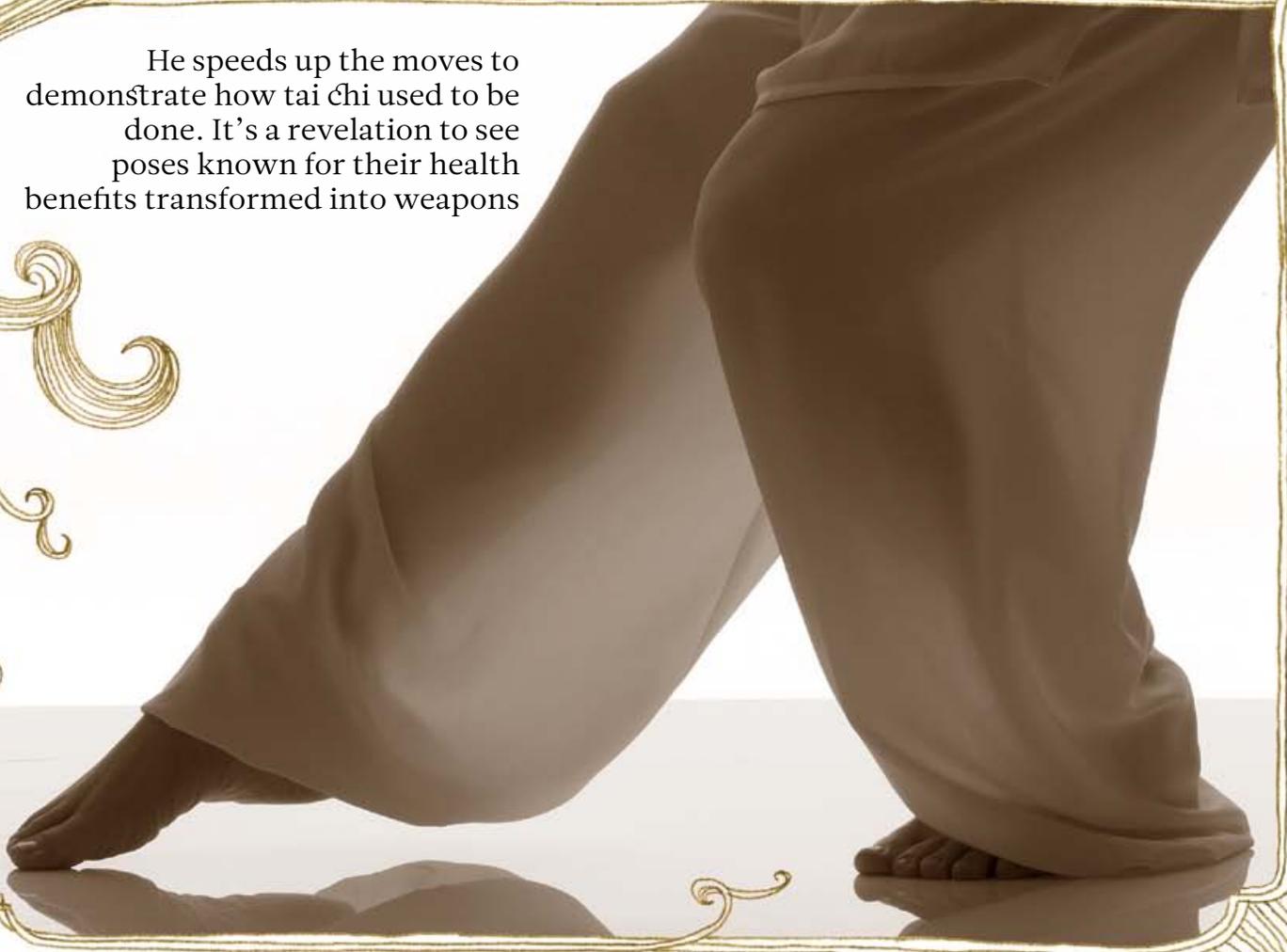
Tai chi—which means "supreme ultimate fist"—is arguably the most popular of the three-hundred-odd Chinese martial arts, known collectively as wushu. Like yoga, tai chi begins with external flexibility and balance before moving inward. The idea is to do the pose repeatedly until it changes your posture, improves your belly breathing, makes your joints flexible, and centers your mind. Legs ground the body and provide balance. Energy originates in the feet before flowing upward to waist, chest, and



IN TAI CHI, THERE ARE NO PAUSES BETWEEN MOVEMENTS

"The whole body transformed into a hieroglyph, a succession of hieroglyphs, of attitudes modulating from significance to significance, like a poem or a piece of music," wrote Aldous Huxley of tai chi.

He speeds up the moves to demonstrate how tai chi used to be done. It's a revelation to see poses known for their health benefits transformed into weapons



arms, gaining momentum along the way until it explodes outward through punches or kicks. Tai chi practitioners try to remain relaxed while moving so that this energy can flow without obstruction.

In the United States, about 2.3 million people practice tai chi, according to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. Studies show that regular practice can help reduce cholesterol, heart attacks, and high blood pressure as well as osteoarthritis, sleep disorders, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. One study reported a forty percent reduction in the number of falls in an elderly group practicing tai chi.

The Chinese government's relationship with tai chi is conflicted; the authorities recognize its value as a tool for well-being in a nation enduring a health care crisis, but also fear its cult power. The practice of Falun Gong—which uses the principles of tai chi and *qigong*, or controlled breathing—was banned by President Jiang Zemin in 1999. The move stemmed from a peaceful protest by ten thousand followers outside the Zhongnanhai government compound against a government-ordered media campaign opposing Falun Gong. Many Falun Gong practitioners remain in prison today.

SHAOLIN, MEANING “Young Forest,” is a monastery in the Song Shan Mountains of Henan Province.

Legend has it that an Indian monk, Bodhidharma, traveled there in the sixth century, stared at a wall in silence for nine years, and taught the monks martial arts techniques, which they used to defend the emperor. Shaolin-style wushu, which emphasizes discipline, penance, and brutal practice as a way to achieve superhuman strength and skill, is a “hard external” wushu method that lends itself to combat, in contrast to softer “internal” wushu styles that focus on health and longevity.

For centuries, Shaolin was the only way. Neijia, or internal, styles originated with a Taoist monk, Zhang Sanfeng, in China's Wudang Mountains in the twelfth century. Zhang observed a snake fighting a crane. Every time the crane struck, the snake would dart its head out of the way and hit the crane with its tail. Even though the crane was bigger and stronger, the snake eventually won. From such observations, Zhang came up with the basis of many of China's non-Shaolin martial arts: to yield in the face of aggression, to turn your opponent's strength against him. Tai chi comes under this category.

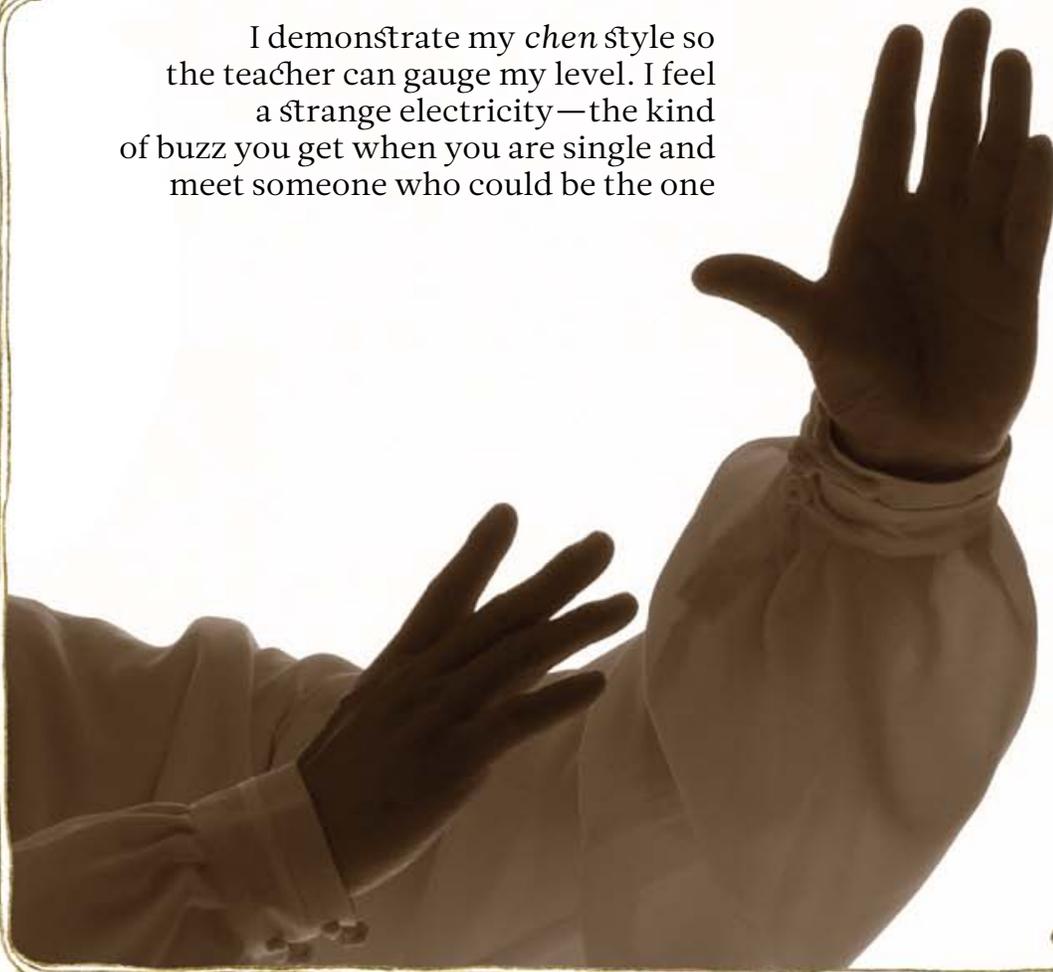
While I am not a Shaolin student, I want to take a traditional Shaolin class, so I visit Longwu Kungfu Cen-



**NEEDLE AT SEA
BOTTOM**

Tai chi burns more calories than surfing and has been shown to reduce the risk of falls in the elderly.

I demonstrate my *chen* style so the teacher can gauge my level. I feel a strange electricity—the kind of buzz you get when you are single and meet someone who could be the one



ter, an urban day school in Shanghai. Longwu is a large open space with mirrors for walls, like a gymnasium. On one side, a master is teaching Shaolin-style wushu to a group of Chinese and foreigners. Tall and swarthy, he yells his commands in English that sounds like Chinese: “*Forwa, fuit togetha, kicku, handsup, whaaa. . .*” A dozen students lift their sticks and strike. “*Whaa!*”



PLAYING THE LUTE
Studies have shown a connection between the daily practice of tai chi and emotional well-being.

I stand in the back and follow the class to the best of my ability. Many of the movements overlap with tai chi, but the use of the stick, and the sudden punches, are new to me. Across the hall another master, bare torsoed and balding, is giving a private boxing lesson to a helmeted man who seems unable to dodge his lightning punches.

I ask Longwu’s founder, a former national wushu champion named Alvin Guo, how he manages to attract such high-quality instructors. “An old Chinese saying goes, ‘Once a teacher, always a father,’” is his enigmatic reply.

I spend the next two days in Shanghai taking tai chi lessons at Longwu and two other places, the Jingwu sports training center and the Qingpu school. None of the three tai chi teachers I meet are for me. One

is more interested in how much I can pay per hour than in advancing my practice. The other two are better but don’t speak even rudimentary English. (I had e-mailed them before my arrival and their responses were in English, apparently sent through senior students.) They nod approvingly when I show them my techniques, adjust my arms and body, but we don’t progress beyond that. There is no conversation.

Recognizing the right guru is the stuff of lore in Eastern thought. I too have some parameters. There has to be that intangible connection, of course. Beyond that, I seek generosity. In ancient India and China, when it came to spiritual disciplines, knowledge was a gift that gurus offered for free to worthy students. It was understood that the student would then make an offering, to solidify the connection. All of my teachers in India and the United States—the good ones, anyway—taught me for free. I am hoping that this pattern will continue in Beijing, where I fly to next.

BEIHAI PARK is the loveliest in Beijing. Weeping willows border the lake, and with several tai chi groups practicing a variety of forms, you can cherry-pick one that is right for you. I join a gathering of women who move to the sound of tinny Chinese music from a small tape player. One of them, a radiant young mother, offers me her sword as she takes a break to comfort

her baby in a nearby pram. I shake my head and try to explain that I am not at her level. She smiles, insisting. I am secretly thrilled. Sword tai chi is more nuanced and subtle because of the strength and speed of a sharp instrument. Movements such as “swallow skims the water” and “black dragon wags its tail” take on more gravitas as I execute them.

Later that day, looking up tai chi classes on the China Culture Center’s Web site, I am distracted by a lecture on “cricket fighting and chirping culture” and decide to attend. I make my way to the center, located in a large, squat building in a quiet neighborhood, where founder Feng Cheng lectures in English, speaking poignantly about how the Chinese love to catch and keep crickets. He tells of cabbies who drive the night shift with a cricket in a box inside their shirt so that they can listen to the comforting sound of their pet during the long, lonely night. Why, I ask Feng, are the Chinese more fond of crickets than of the dragonflies or butterflies I caught as a child in India?

“Because they fight,” he replies simply.

I come back the following evening for a 7:30 tai chi class. The teacher, thirty-eight-year-old Paul Wang, has the light, playful quality you see in Buddhist masters. With his bald head, ascetic appearance, and thin body, he looks like a monk, which he is not. “The baldness is just my hairstyle,” he says with a laugh.

I have high hopes. Perhaps he is the one. After class, we get to talking.

“Sometimes when we meet a difficulty, we have a lot of tension and hurry to fix the problem,” he says. “When

you master the way of balance and gentle intention, everything you face will be different. There will be less hurry, your mind will be very clear. When someone is aggressive, you normally become tense. But that is the moment when you must practice your tai chi to release the stress. First, don’t have resistance to yourself; then you won’t have resistance to the other person. If he is aggressive, simply accept his moves and reflect the aggression back at him.”

Wang is a highly accomplished practitioner, but I cannot get past the smoothness that he has cultivated to deal with the expats and foreigners. I crave the artless roughness of the old masters.

I’m looking forward to taking a tai chi class at the Beijing Sport University when I learn that it’s canceled. At the Fairmont Beijing, where I am staying, the tai chi instructor, Link Li, offers to give me a free lesson. I am disdainful. Learning tai chi at a luxury hotel? How good can the instructor be?

But over the course of two lessons, Link improves my technique manifold. He tells

PLACES & PRICES

Learning from the Masters

If you’ve got plenty of time—say, six months—a very understanding family, and a well-connected *shifu* (teacher), you can ask him or her to put you in touch with *shifus* at the Shaolin temples in Henan and Fujian province. Once you show up, however, you’ll still have to do penance until a master accepts you. A less strenuous option is to take a martial arts immersion trip with a tour company such as **SCIC Beijing** (347-410-5055 in New York; 14 days, about \$1,600 per person) or **China Taiji Tour** (86-29-133-1918-1406; 12 days, \$2,650 per person).

If you prefer a serious academic tai chi environment, you can apply to programs at China’s sports universities and learn Chinese in the bargain. **Allied Gateway** offers month- and semester-long martial arts study at universities in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (86-20-8563-0680; in Beijing, a full semester is \$6,835 in a single dorm room, \$8,216 in a hotel; a four-week intensive course is \$2,440 in a single dorm room, \$3,891 in a hotel).

If tai chi isn’t your focus but you’d still like to get a taste, there are drop-in classes at urban day schools such as Beijing’s **Milun School of Traditional Kungfu** (86-138-1170-6568; group class, \$15; private lesson, \$38) and Shanghai’s **Longwu Kungfu Center** (86-21-6287-1528; group class, \$15; private lesson, \$30). My teacher in Beijing, **Mrs. Shi**, gives private lessons. Look for her at the Ziweiruhua pavilion in Yuandadu Relics Park between 6 and 9 a.m. or call in advance for an appointment (86-138-1189-5462; two hours, \$60). With classes on everything from cricket fighting to tai chi to Chinese landscape painting, Beijing’s **China Culture Center** is a terrific place to get your cultural bearings (86-10-6432-9341; china.culturecenter.org). The tai chi master demonstrating the moves in this article, Dr. Nan Lu, is the founder of the **Traditional Chinese Medicine World Foundation**, in New York, which offers tai chi classes and a variety of courses in Chinese medicine (212-274-1079). **-S. N.**



SINGLE WHIP

The philosophy and fighting style of tai chi permeate Ang Lee’s film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.



SNAKE CREEPS THROUGH THE GRASS

Tai chi asks practitioners to use leg muscles that they have likely been neglecting for years.

me to take “soft heavy steps with flexible strength.” This means that while I must tread softly, I must be firm, be “heavy” with intent. At the same time, I must have flexible strength so that I can move quickly when attacked. I watch as Link does the slower, dancelike moves that most people associate with tai chi, and marvel as he speeds up the same moves to demonstrate how tai chi used to be done in its earlier, more militant incarnation. It’s a revelation to see poses known for their health benefits transformed instantly into weapons.

When he was just twenty-five, Link tells me, he was authorized by his teacher, a prominent master known as Gao Yong, to take on students. Who knew that this smiling thirty-year-old hotel employee was a bona fide *shifu*?

At the end of the session, I chat about tai chi with Link. Like Wang, he is highly skilled and eager to cater to my needs. And that’s what’s bothering me, I realize. I don’t want to be treated like a tourist on a tight schedule but rather like a student away from the constraints of time and family. I want a teacher who will be true to himself or herself, not fuss over me. I am looking for someone raw, someone who can bring the mountain air of Wudang into my consciousness.

IT IS MY LAST DAY in Beijing, and I am desperate. Fool, I berate myself, questioning my hope of finding a teacher, *people train in China for months—how could you expect to accomplish anything in a week?* After my morning round of tai chi at Beihai Park, I return to the hotel to find an (*Continued on page 128*)

Costa Rica

side of the bridge, and behold not just two or three crocodiles but more than a dozen, moving slowly or not at all—almost every one of them visible in its entirety, from menacing snout to fearsome tail. Amazing.

And yet. There is something deflating about having them served up this readily, to a populous audience of motorists who have done nothing more arduous than hit the brakes. On the far side of the bridge stands a Los Cocodrilos restaurant, a Los Cocodrilos bar, a Los Cocodrilos souvenir shop. The noise of cars, not cicadas, fills the air.

I saw only part of Saddam's nephew, and there wasn't any sign of the rest of the clan. But that was the more electric encounter, the one that quickened my pulse and yanked me further outside my comfort zone, which was just where I needed to be. □

Tai Chi

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 119

e-mail from one of my tour guides directing me to a female *shifu*, Mrs. Shi, who leads tai chi at 10 A.M. every day, rain or shine, by the old city wall on the south part of town.

The concierge gives me detailed directions. The subway ride takes an hour. I get out and promptly lose my way. I call Mrs. Shi on her mobile phone. She is friendly and giggles a lot but speaks mostly Chinese and is unable to guide me to her location. I find an English-speaking girl who shows me the way. I walk across a park cut through by a canal bordered by weeping willows. A manicured lawn on one side is full of seniors ballroom dancing, people playing badminton, mothers pushing babies in prams, young men jogging, and locals sitting on park benches and reading newspapers. Amid the ballroom dancers, I find Mrs. Shi's tai chi class. Her straight hair pulled back in a ponytail, she has a face appropriate to her fifty-odd years but the body tone of a woman half her age. Her class is just ending. A middle-aged man gives her the fist-to-palm salute that we martial arts students offer our teachers. Mrs. Shi turns to me with a smile. I demonstrate my *chen* style (the oldest of five tai chi styles) so she can gauge my level. She watches me, and my hair starts to stand on end. It sounds crazy, but I feel a strange electricity—the kind of buzz you get when you are single and meet someone really attractive who could be the one.

I try to remove my jacket so that she can see the way my body moves more clearly. "I can see your form," she says simply.

Then it is her turn. Her stomach coils (there is no other word for it), her knees turn, her back arches. She does things with her body that I have never seen before. When I marvel at her moves, she says, "Quantity equals quality," and laughs in the fashion of Chinese people who are aware of, and embarrassed by, their poor English. "Tai chi is a life journey."

I try to imitate her moves. I am awed by her energy. I am ready to prostrate myself and beg her to accept me as her student. But in order for me to know that she is the right *shifu*, there is one final test. I offer to pay for a private lesson.

"When do you want to start?" she asks.

Now, I reply.

Her face clouds. Tai chi is very "comprehensive," she says. "Hard to learn in one day, one lesson. I can teach you one form," she says. "No charge."

Temple bells ring and sparrows sing. I have found my teacher.

For the next hour, Mrs. Shi takes me through the same stomach-coiling move that will, I know, if done regularly, give me six-pack abs. Her instructions are simple and often repetitive.

"Keep the back relaxed and the front tight. Yang in the back is expansive; yin in front is closed." She touches my back. "Lower back loose, upper back tight. Quantity equals quality."

She can see errors in my posture even

when I think I am obeying her instructions. She tells me all this with a shining light of compassion and understanding in her eyes. "You are too much in a hurry," she says. She might be referring to my life. "Wisdom requires patience."

An hour later, Mrs. Shi says, "Do this movement sixty times a day for sixty days, and then you will begin to feel something. Once you feel something, come back to me and I will teach you the next lesson."

We chitchat. She has one daughter, she says, who is twenty-one and living in India. What does your daughter do? I ask.

She is a yoga teacher, Mrs. Shi says.

I laugh. I cannot help but appreciate the irony of coming all the way from India to learn tai chi from a Chinese woman whose daughter is in India studying yoga.

I bow to Mrs. Shi, give her the martial arts fist-to-palm salute, and once more offer to pay for the class. Again she refuses. As I walk through the ballroom dancers, I turn back and find her watching me, waving.

I have to offer my *shifu* something. I am not even sure if I will ever see her again, although of course that isn't the point. I have encountered a master who has changed my practice and potentially my life. She will reside in my mind, and I will pay homage to her before I begin my daily practice. But what to give her as an offering?

The midday sun is high in the sky, the grass invitingly green. The ballroom danc-

By Emily Cox and Henry Rathvon

Word Trips

COOK'S TOUR

As you sample the world's restaurants, match each country with a related dish by writing the food item's identifying letter in the appropriate blanks. Four dishes will be left over, and their identifying letters will spell a national specialty. Its country of origin is the answer to this month's puzzle.

Leftovers: _____

Country: _____

- | | | |
|-------------|---|--------------------|
| 1 China | — | D borscht |
| 2 Greece | — | M couscous |
| 3 Hungary | — | R dim sum |
| 4 Indonesia | — | T foie gras |
| 5 Italy | — | U gazpacho |
| 6 Japan | — | F goulash |
| 7 Morocco | — | B haggis |
| 8 Norway | — | A kimchi |
| 9 Peru | — | P lutefisk |
| 10 Russia | — | I minestrone |
| 11 Scotland | — | N moussaka |
| 12 Spain | — | C naan |
| | | K quinoa |
| | | E sashimi |
| | | Z satay |
| | | O Wiener schnitzel |

MARCH'S PUZZLE ANSWER: Go to page 127.

Enter online for a chance to win a spa weekend for two!

Enter your answer online at cntraveler.com/wordtrips/june. No purchase necessary. Full rules and entry form available online at this address. All correct answers will be included in a drawing for the annual prize: a spa resort weekend for two (approximate retail value, \$2,500). Entries must be received by 11:59 P.M. E.T. on June 30, 2011, when the contest ends. Contest open to legal residents of the United States and Canada (excluding Quebec) age 18 and older. Odds of winning depend on the number of correct entries received. Answer will be published in the September issue. Sponsored by Condé Nast Traveler, 4 Times Square, New York, New York 10036.

Tai Chi

ers turn. Melodious Chinese music wafts from somewhere. On the spur of the moment, I stop. The grass is my yoga mat. I wave at my *shifu*, who is still watching me. My elbows support my head as I bend and execute a perfect headstand. Years of practice as a child still haven't left me. I am doing the Sirsasana yoga pose in a Chinese park as an offering for my tai chi teacher. Someone claps. I get back up on my feet, wave at my *shifu*, turn, and head to the subway for the long ride home. □

Sweden

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 125

frozen lake. Nils dug a pit in the snow and lit a fire. He warmed a pot of reindeer soup, which he ladled into wooden bowls, and we sat on reindeer skins and sipped. Lunch concluded at sunset, which in the middle of January arrives at around 2:30 P.M.

In the evening, back at camp, a friend of Nils's named Anders Kärrstedt prepared tagliatelle in a mushroom, cream, and reindeer sauce. The meat has a silky texture, and the flavor is sweet with just the barest hint of game. After my second helping, Anders talked about reindeer meat. He told me that in northern Sweden you can buy it at the supermarket, and that the Sami eat nothing but reindeer all winter long, apparently suffering no ill effects. They eat only forest- or mountain-fed reindeer, because they don't like the flavor that grain pellets impart. The best-tasting reindeer, Anders said, are males that find year-round greenery in Norwegian fjords. "The back fat is this thick," he said, measuring at least three inches between his index finger and his thumb. "And the meat is just wonderful." I asked for a third helping.

In the morning, we ate smoked reindeer.

THERE IS an unexpected bipolarity to Swedish life. Take the climate. Every December, the country plunges into darkness, an occasion for considerable gloom and depression among locals. Then, come June, a relentless midsummer sun fixes itself in the sky; it's a time of year one Swede described to me as "manic." Or consider Swedish music. The country is best known for ABBA, the audio equivalent of high-fructose corn syrup. (I mean that as a compliment.) Among a younger demographic, however, Sweden is better known for a fringe genre known as death metal.

We think of Sweden as a kind of forward-thinking Socialist paradise, where humanity's baser instincts have been tamed and its higher ideals made law. But then the Stieg Larsson trilogy came along

and painted Sweden as a dark, repressive society riddled with racism, demented corporate greed, and eccentric forms of sexual abuse. (In case you think Larsson is guilty of exaggeration, ponder this: The week I visited, a sensational newspaper story revealed that the founder of IKEA, who had for years insisted he no longer controlled the multinational furniture giant, did, in fact, run it through a secret company based in Lichtenstein called Interogo—which sounds like a name Larsson would have made up.)

Then there is the sauna. Its purpose is to get very hot so that you can then get very cold, so that you can then get very hot again, and so forth. Could there be a more extreme form of leisure?

Sweden is by no means Finland when it comes to saunas. But as home to almost a million severely heated wood-paneled rooms, it places a not too distant second. (It might place first were it not for the fact that the city of Stockholm banned public saunas in 1725 due to concerns over immorality. I imagine a sexually repressed mayor sitting next to a young model from Malmö, then breaking out the quill pen an hour later to write his edict.)

And yet, if this wellness excursion lacked anything thus far, it was a good sauna. Not a single one was equal to my expectation. At Raison d'Etre and the IceHotel, electric saunas issued a dry and institutional heat. I was pleased to see a wood-fired sauna at Nils's reindeer camp, but with the outside temperature hovering at minus eight degrees, the thermometer hardly inched above room temperature.

The situation was easily remedied. A few days' float down the Torne River, you find a resort snuggled up to the Finnish border with a name as cute as a reindeer's bottom: Kukkolaforseen. The place is notorious not only for excellent whitefish fishing but as home to the Swedish Sauna Academy.

I boarded an eastbound bus in Kiruna, cued up a Swedish death metal band called Autopsy Torment on my iPhone, and was duly thrilled. Not by the music, whose lyrics—" . . . I see the tunnel of death / on my way to eternal dark . . ."—in no way promote wellness. But what a ride.

Swedish buses come equipped with extraordinarily powerful headlights. When it got dark, the driver flipped a switch and the world was suddenly bathed in xenon brilliance. An hour in, it started snowing and the bus felt like it was rolling on cotton at high speed through cubic acres of pixie dust. We would pass oncoming trucks and sail into a wall of "snow smoke," a billowing whiteness that lasted a mini eternity. In between, I would gaze out at passing farmhouses and catch glimpses of cozy interiors: candles burning on dining room tables, flickering TV screens, Swedish

kitchen sinks in quiet repose.

Six hours later I arrived at Kukkolaforseen, where I was met by Mathias Spolander—a blond (of course), trim (of course) man of definite opinions when it comes to saunas. This is hardly a surprise considering that Mathias is the son of one of the Swedish Sauna Academy's founding fathers and has enjoyed more than 3,600 saunas during his 35 years of Swedish life. (He figures he'll surpass 17,000 by the time he reaches 80.9.)

Over a dinner of smoked whitefish and Wasa crackers—a meal as rich in long-chain omega-3s as it was in fiber—he laid out his philosophy. Most saunas, he told me, are too hot and too dry. A proper sauna, he said, should be fired for two or three hours, to get the rocks adequately hot, but the door should be left open to bring the interior temperature down to about 140 degrees. "That way," he said, "you get a longer sauna and a lot of steam."

"When can I try one?"

"Tomorrow," Mathias said.

The next day, I would step into no fewer than six different saunas, only two of which were actually at Kukkolaforseen. My day of intense heat and cool kicked off nine miles down the road in Haparanda, a geographically significant town that boasts not only the most northerly IKEA in the world but also the most easterly point in Sweden, a hotel called Cape East.

Cape East's spa, which cost ten million dollars and is a minor architectural masterpiece of glass, wood, and stone, contains the world's largest sauna, seating 150. I baked in it for a while, then baked in a "stone sauna" (lots of tile), a Finnish sauna (lots of wood), and a steam sauna (lots of steam). Somewhere between medium and well done, I stepped beneath a stainless steel contraption and pulled on a chain, releasing twenty-two gallons of icy water which came down in one fell sploosh. (The main reason you do this, like my cold

CREDITS

Page 12: Courtesy Six Senses Resorts & Spas. **Page 14:** Clockwise from top: Courtesy Alexandria Masud; courtesy Saadia Shamise; courtesy Sara Carroll; courtesy Mariana Piedrahita. **Page 16:** Top: Jason Florio. **Page 18:** From left: Courtesy Andrea Gentl; courtesy Soo-Jeong Kang; courtesy Mark Schatzker. **Page 20:** From left: Ram P. Singh; Food-Collection/Aurora Photos. **Page 22:** Hugh Sturrock/Welcome Images. **Page 30:** Top: Wolfgang Kaehler/Getty Images. **Page 32:** From left: Courtesy Yeti; courtesy Jackson Kayak; courtesy Catalina Yachts; courtesy Rou Estate. **Page 38:** Clockwise from left: Keren Su/Corbis; courtesy Mandarin Oriental; courtesy Rosewood Resorts. **Pages 112–113:** Michele Nastasi/View Pictures.

WHERE TO BUY IT

On the cover: Bikini top, \$75, and bottom, \$69, both by Nanette Lepore (nanettelepore.com); scarf by Tory Burch, \$95 (toryburch.com). **Page 100:** Dress by Malia Mills, \$325 (800-685-3479; maliamills.com). **Page 103:** Pajama top by Frette, \$225 for the set (frette.com).