

KUR CULTURE AT KLOSTER GERODE

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While travelling in Germany last year it was fascinating to come across healing clinics in towns and villages. **Kur culture**, the tradition of spending time at a health clinic to recuperate from life's stresses, is a well-known and accepted tradition in parts of Central and Eastern Europe. Stemming from the widespread historical practice of visiting natural spa regions for relaxation, leisure and healing, retreat culture seemed to be very much a part of local paradigm.



As a Satyananda yoga teacher, I wanted to take time out and learn more about yoga and healing in Europe. So, after locating a health retreat close enough to our final destination of Berlin (approx. 300km), my partner and I headed to a spot where indeed there are no spas, but rather forests and a centre that was once a Benedictine Monastery. **WEG DER MITTE** (The Middle Way) Foundation is the vision of Daya Mullins Ph. D, M.S.C., who in 1977 initially established a yoga centre in Berlin and later purchased this former monastery and grounds for retreats and further research into yoga practices and therapy. The opportunity to stay in a historical monastery setting combined with what this retreat location seemed to offer according to its website (www.wegdermitte.de) seemed the ideal way to travel.

Getting to the retreat via the German Autobahn, on which there are no speed limits, was perhaps the ultimate contrast to what lay in store. That afternoon we travelled about 300 kilometers from the fascinating medieval town of Rothenberg ob der Tauber and arrived at the retreat in the early evening. With the last stretch completed in heavy German summer rain, it was a joy to ring the bell at the monastery gate and be greeted by a calm resident, provided with indoor slippers, and then a sumptuous organic, mostly home-grown meal. The highlight, as is so often the case when travelling, were the people. Seated at the table were a range of visitors and residents all keen to exchange reasons for being there. Except for us, everyone was German that week, but the range of ages, experiences with yoga, and areas of Germany from where they had all arrived, varied. Opportunities to learn about yoga in Germany continued throughout the retreat. And there were plenty of fluent English speakers curious and keen to quiz us about where we came from.

The way the whole centre is run demonstrates its commitment to healing practices and the founding members' vision to integrate various Eastern practices into everyday life. The resident who orientated us on the first evening had been with the foundation from its early years and clearly walked the talk. While this retreat centre, just south of the Harz mountains, runs a wide range of courses and training all year round, **WEG DER MITTE** foundation continues its work in Berlin. This includes yoga classes for the public, extensive outreach

karma yoga in the community for parents and children in need, support for the chronically ill and other services. All of this is backed up by many years of research and practice.

Here in the forests of central Germany, it is not hard to feel supported and contained and the feel of the retreat is quickly acquired at the start of the first meal, all of which are eaten in noble silence for the first few minutes. The history of the place certainly provides visitors with opportunities to experience gratitude. After the Second World War the former monastery became a refuge for orphans. During divided Germany, the forest walks around the monastery were off limits to the local citizens of the GDR. After the Berlin Wall came down the monastery and its grounds were purchased by the Foundation. It is easy to see why **WEG DER MITTE** chose this location. Some of the fourteenth century stone walls are still in place and the green setting and large grounds provide ample space for walking, exploring, and reflecting.

The integrated yoga system practiced here is called **BenefitYoga** and the former kloster is also home to the European College for Yoga Therapy (ECYT). This system of yoga describes itself as a 'method firmly grounded in authentic Yoga, Yoga Therapy, Ayurveda, and the understanding of and respect for the interconnectedness of life' (www.wegdermitte.de). Teacher training in **BenefitYoga** is a four-year commitment, but there are a range of other courses and stay options for those wanting an initial or ongoing taste of yogic life. Yoga classes take place every morning and while the instruction is generally in German, the multi-talented European teachers can and did provide added instructions in English with linguistic ease. That week we were taught by both a new teacher in training as well as a very experienced practitioner. This included the blessing of witnessing the ongoing transmission and rejuvenation of tradition from master to student, and back from student to master.



The morning classes in Benefit Yoga are a wonderful opportunity to experience and/or rediscover some of yoga's fundamental elements. These included completing balanced asana programs with attention to all parts of the body in a detailed and very safe manner. In particular, I picked up a few new asanas to bring awareness and release for the arms, a region that I can sometimes neglect in my own practice and classes. The moments of pure simplicity and depth when in pranayama practices were enhanced by the exquisite surroundings of the sadhana practice space and forested grounds.

Further opportunities to be yogic abound in the place – the herb garden is a large and enclosed space where communing with the sleeping resident cats is always an option, exploring the vegetable produce inspires gratitude, and there are plenty of opportunities to be involved in karma yoga. A commitment of some seva yoga in the form of preparing meals is required during a stay and this also provides a way to connect with others, serve and observe yoga in daily life. The evenings consist of a group meditation and *kirtan* session. It would be hard not to be inspired by these musical sessions in which a range of spiritual chants, prayers and expressions from different traditions and languages are led by residents. Open for all to participate and observe according to personal level of comfort and interest, there is some amazing talent and energy among the residents who seem to bring everyone together. While mouna (noble silence) is not practiced at other times apart from start of meals, my partner and I were so awed when exiting the sadhana space into the forested grounds that we moved into mouna at the end of the first evening and kept this nightly practice for the duration of our stay.

Individual yoga sessions are available for more personal tuition and there is also a health clinic where various modalities are available, such as shiatsu, craniosacral and acupuncture (pre-book before arrival). Accommodation is available in single, or 2-3 beds in a room with bathrooms. The vegetarian food is organic, plentiful and full of variety and goodness, and Kloster Gerode's location, so close to the majestic Harz and Ohm mountains, makes it a unique place to be yogic when on the Continent. Living up to its translated name of The Middle Way, WEG DER MITTE's retreat also has a weekend café which is open to residents and visitors. Here one can indulge in Kaffee und Kuchen (Coffee & Cake), as is traditional in Germany, with cakes including ingredients such as the locally grown aronia berry.



Eventually, after a cake (or two) our time came to leave. We marveled, as one does at the end of a retreat, at how relaxed we had been and how quickly the place had worked its charms on us. At times, we had even slept too much and eaten too much. We had simply let our bodies unwind and now was the time to wind up again, or at least focus on Autobahn driving.

Kloster Gerode is the type of place where visitors can choose their own pace of retreat, while being given a retreat framework that inspires reflection and peace. For further information see www.wegdermitte.de