

SPRING TRAVEL

# 'Apple Watch, shut up': Learning to relax at the Kripalu retreat in the Berkshires

How a wellness weekend taught me to relax and love the journey.

By **Daniel McGinn** Updated March 16, 2023, 2 hours ago



Practicing a yoga pose by the Stockbridge Bowl, which is also called Lake Mahkeenac. TRICIA MCCORMACK

Midday Friday is prime check-in time at resorts, and as the world eased toward the weekend on a snowy January afternoon, the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health (413-448-3500, [Kripalu.org](https://www.kripalu.org)) in Stockbridge was bustling. The parking lot was jammed. A

line of guests waited at the check-in counter. When they reached the front, some of these guests — nearly all women, some solo, others with a partner, some on group getaways — asked to join the Saturday morning “sound bath,” where participants meditate while a guide plays tuning forks, gongs, singing bowls, and chimes. Sorry, they’re told: All spots were reserved more than a week ago.

To be sure, there would still be plenty to do here — classes and activities run from 6:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., seven days a week — but some guests begged and cajoled, pursuing a slot in the sound bath with a desperation usually reserved for Taylor Swift tickets. Their best bet, the front desk staff advised, would be to show up outside the room on Saturday morning and hope for a no-show. I admitted defeat — I wouldn’t be able to join the sound bath, either.

The busy scene is a dramatic contrast from swaths of 2020 and 2021. When the COVID-19 pandemic took over America in March 2020, Kripalu, the country’s largest yoga retreat, sent its guests and staff home. The nonprofit paid its employees through June, but faced with potential insolvency, it then took the painful step of laying off 450 of its 489 employees. The retreat stayed shuttered for 17 months, and its annual revenue crashed from \$37 million in 2019 to \$11 million in 2020.

Now, like the guests who flock to its wooded Berkshires campus, Kripalu is doing a post-pandemic reset. Since reopening in August 2021, it’s hired 337 employees. It’s simplified and streamlined its programming choices — pre-2020, some guests complained there were so many activities they found it hard to relax. It’s expanded its online programming, which now includes a \$59 monthly subscription for video yoga and meditation. Longtime fans are thrilled to have it back: In the 19 months since Kripalu reopened, 40,000 people have visited, and one loyalist has returned 26 times.

In 2022, revenue rebounded to \$29 million.

It's a fair bet those numbers will keep rising. The once-alternative regimens that Kripalu celebrates — yoga, meditation, organic food — are becoming mainstream. Just over a week after my stay, NFL quarterback Aaron Rodgers announced he was commencing a four-day, four-night “darkness retreat” at a center in Oregon, where he would sit in silence and decide whether to retire from football (as of press time, he still hadn't made up his mind).

I opted for something less radical: Kripalu's two-day snowshoeing and yoga program. Before my visit, I consulted with a colleague who's visited Kripalu a dozen times. “It's a magical place,” she told me. “My stress instantly melts away the moment I walk in the door.” Sign me up.



A guest practices yoga at Kripalu. TRICIA MCCORMACK

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Kripalu does not force people to sit in darkness, but its rules and culture are not for everyone. The facility is smoke-free, alcohol-free, and recreational-substance-free. Breakfasts must be eaten in silence. Carrying or using cellphones is discouraged in public areas. It takes a certain personality to thrive here. People use the word “journey” profligately and repeatedly stop hikes to show off their knowledge of tree species. And as I learned one evening, Kripalu may require you to engage in cringey icebreaker exercises. Example: Dance to a Beyoncé song, and when the music stops, lock eyes with the nearest stranger and discuss your favorite childhood candy. As I described my fondness for Fun Dip to a new friend from Cape Cod and prayed the

dancing would end soon, sitting in darkness with Aaron Rodgers suddenly sounded appealing.

Kripalu calls itself a “retreat,” not a “resort,” and that’s clear in the accommodations. Its main building was built as a Jesuit seminary in 1957 on grounds previously occupied by a grand 19th-century mansion once owned by Andrew Carnegie. After the Jesuits abandoned the building in 1970, there was brief talk of converting it to a state prison. It sat idle until 1983, when followers of the late Swami Kripalu, a yoga master, moved in.

Jesuits and yogis share an austere design philosophy that remains visible in the guest rooms. The cheapest lodging option is a bunk bed in a shared dormitory space (rates start at \$95 per night midweek, including three meals and all activities). The nicest rooms, in an annex built in 2009, feature private baths and start at \$345 per night midweek. For my stay, I chose a mid-priced 9-foot-by-12-foot private room with two twin beds, cinder block walls, a small sink, and no thermostat. (Warning: Rooms run hot, so open the windows.) My room lacked a private bath, but because there are relatively few men at Kripalu, I had the men’s room down the hall mostly to myself. My two-night stay, including the snowshoe and yoga program, totaled \$749. Although I was surprised by the sparseness, I didn’t mind it: As on a cruise ship, this is a place where spending too much time in your room means you’re doing it wrong.

Indeed, the reason people keep coming back to Kripalu is the strength of its activities and the people who lead them. On Friday afternoon, I joined a dozen guests and two guides on a mindful hike up to a lake. (Like the Saturday morning sound bath, these reservation-only hikes, massages, and other “healing arts” treatments can be popular; call at least a week in advance to get a spot.) One guide, Carly, was an herbalist; the

other, Ami Jean, was a trained wildlife tracker. Amid temperatures in the 30s, we strapped on microspikes — giving us traction on the icy paths — and headed up into a forest. Carly instructed us to stay silent to practice mindfulness, noticing the white pine and hemlock that enveloped us.

Halfway through the two-hour trek, we stopped in a section of forest near Monk's Pond. Carly invited us to do a tree meditation: Find a tree, put your body in contact with it, stay silent. "Try to form an interspecies relationship," Carly said. After 10 minutes, she hooted like an owl to signal us to return to the group, causing momentary confusion: "Was that really an owl?" one guest asked. "No, that was me," she replied. On the hike back, we encountered a deer that had apparently been killed by a bobcat the previous day — a rarity, since bobcats usually aren't big enough to take down deer. Ami Jean excitedly reconstructed the scene like an episode of *CSI: Berkshires* and it was fascinating.

At 4:45 p.m., I joined a group in an airy auditorium, where the Jesuits once held Mass, for an hour of gentle yoga led by Katie. (There were also intermediate and Vinyasa offerings, but I opted to take it easy.) Like every instructor I met at Kripalu, Katie could not be better at her job: her amplified voice was soothing and melodic as she guided us through prone stretches and standing balance poses. The hour passed in what felt like 10 minutes. I do yoga only a few times a year, and I'm always struck by how loose and healthy I feel afterward. Walking to the dining hall, I wondered how amazing I'd feel if I began a "practice" with a yogi like Katie every day.

I put that thought aside to focus on dinner. Some guests rave about Kripalu's cuisine, which is nutritious and plant-forward. Breakfasts are abundant and varied, with egg dishes, oatmeal, whole-grain baked goods, fruit, jams, and coffee. Lunches and

dinners are heavy on greens and grains, but the two evening meals during my stay included an Italian chicken dish and shrimp puttanesca. Some meals are completely vegetarian; one of our lunches featured curried chickpeas as the entrée. Desserts are minimal and healthy: Saturday night's fruit crisp tasted like it contained one-tenth the sugar I use when making one at home. Picky eaters or meat-and-potato types won't love some choices (pro tip: full menus can be viewed online in advance), but I enjoyed the food — and after just 24 hours of eating this way, my body started to feel different. This was partly due to the high-fiber, low-fat food that kept me from overeating. But mostly, I suspect, the lack of sugar sent my body into a blissful detox.



A meal from Kripalu's dining hall. TRICIA MCCORMACK

The next morning, after silent breakfast, nine of us and our guide, Evelyn, donned

snowshoes. We headed east, traversing a small Kripalu-owned forest before crossing a road and traipsing across conservation land. Every so often, we stopped to observe animal tracks or listen to brooks. Evelyn asked us to focus on how each stream sounded different, and, when I did, I realized she was right. Before the snowshoeing started, I'd turned on my Apple Watch to track mileage (possibly breaking the no-electronics rule), and whenever we stopped, it buzzed on my wrist, flashing a message: "Finished your workout?" *Apple Watch, shut up*, I thought to myself. *This is about the journey.*

Eventually we snowshoed onto the southern part of land owned by Tanglewood, summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and stopped to meditate near a lake. After arriving back at the main building, we ate lunch and then rejoined the rest of our 50-person program — most of whom chose to hike instead of snowshoe — and laid on mats while Evelyn and her co-facilitator, Erin, led us through an hour of gentle yoga.

Beyond the sugar detox, the most surprising feeling I experienced during the weekend was the lightness in my pocket: I'd left my iPhone back in my room. Going even a few hours without it felt strangely liberating. When I spotted a scenic vista while snowshoeing, instead of reaching to take a photo, I just enjoyed it in real time. When I arrived at the dining hall a few minutes before it opened, instead of reading online ephemera, I pulled up a chair and sat with my thoughts.

By the time I returned to my room at 8:30 p.m. on Saturday evening, I'd spent more than three hours outdoors, exercising amid cold air, sunshine, and many species of trees. Indoors, I'd done one hour of yoga and another hour of meditative breathing. I'd eaten more vegetables than I normally eat in a week and spent shockingly little time

playing with my phone (and none on social media). With no Wi-Fi in my room (although others do have it), I pulled out a book and read. That night, I slept especially well — and when I departed before breakfast the next morning, I wished I could stay for another round of snowshoeing.



Snowshoeing on Stockbridge Bowl. TRICIA MCCORMACK

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Like hotels and airlines around the world, Berkshires vacation spots have experienced a post-pandemic surge. Lodging throughout the region was booked solid last summer, and occupancy rates stayed higher later into the fall than usual, says Lindsey Schmid, senior vice president of tourism and marketing at 1Berkshire, the region's economic

development organization. The average Berkshire visitor is now younger — the age has dropped from 52 to 41 over the last seven years — and outdoor recreation has displaced cultural activities as the most popular pastime. That's partly a function, Schmid speculates, of all the time people spent outside during the worst of COVID. "More and more people see the Berkshires as a four-season getaway," she says.

As Kripalu seeks to rebuild from its hibernation, this would seem a ripe time to take advantage of high demand by raising prices. But in a Zoom interview after my stay, Robert Mulhall, the nonprofit's CEO, said that's not how the organization sees things. Mulhall, an Irish-born CPA who's also certified in yoga, reiki, and mindfulness, says Kripalu's post-pandemic goal is to make its programming more widely available, even to people who can't travel to the Berkshires. In addition to expanding its online programs, it's offering more tiered pricing and scholarships to help lower-income guests and first responders afford a stay. It's also in talks to sell packaged versions of its cuisine in supermarkets.

"We've had some really wonderful, powerful conversations around how we become an organization that is radically accessible," Mulhall says. "We've seen people flooding back — lots of new people, and lots of loyal fans ... [but] we didn't want to be focused on volume. We wanted to focus more on our guests' experience and how we bring our mission forward." In fact, Mulhall says, they've reduced the retreat's maximum weekend capacity, from 650 to 450, to increase guest comfort.

Next time, I'll still call ahead for the sound bath.

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