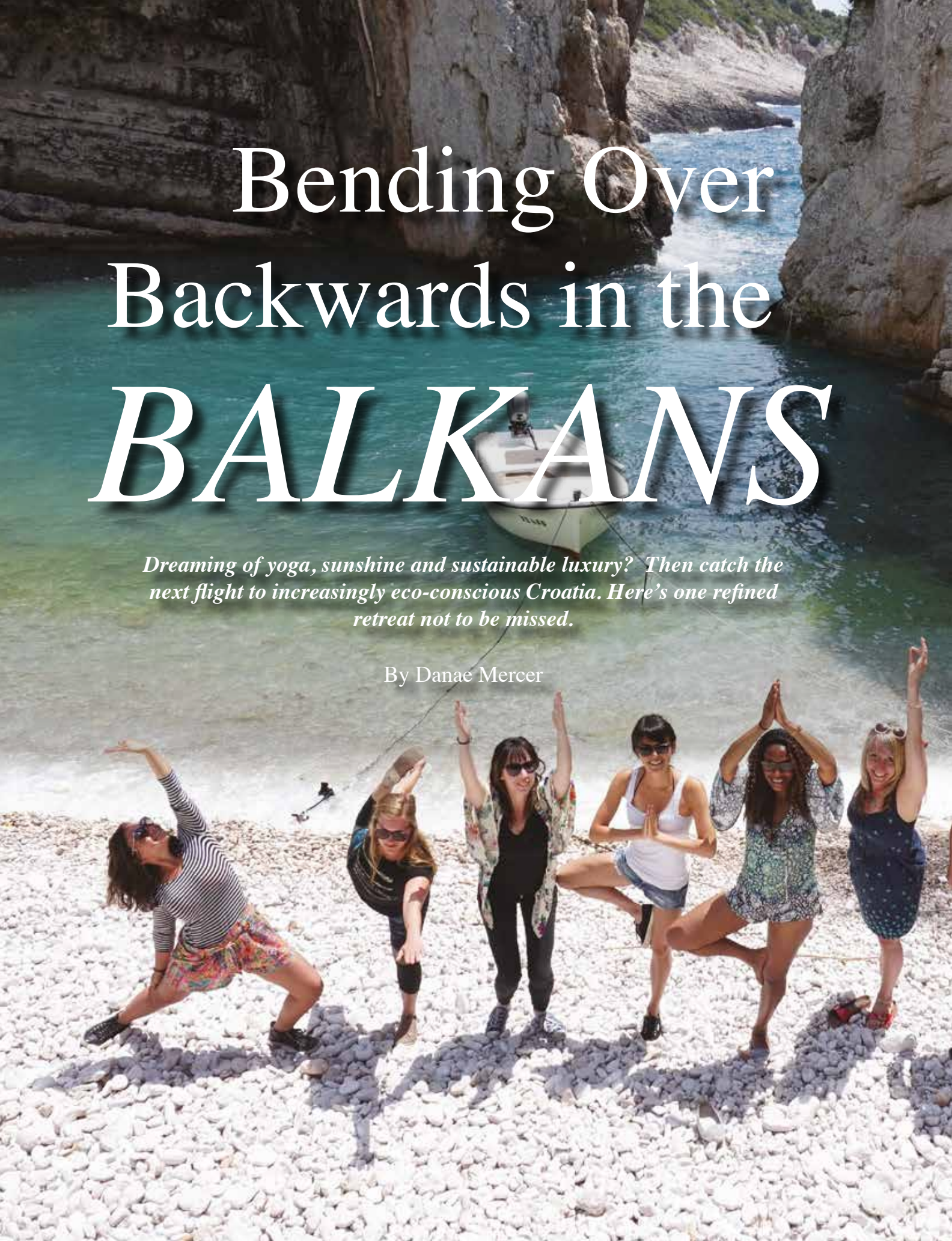


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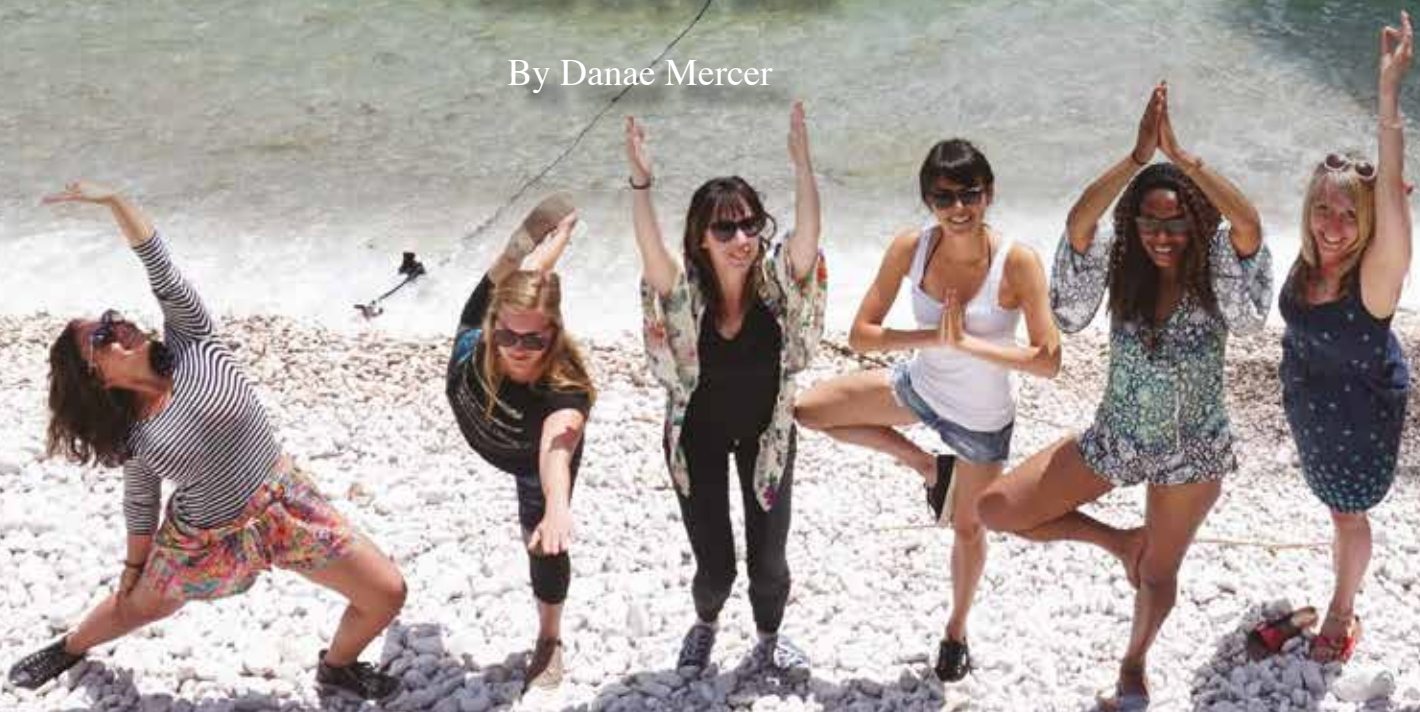




Bending Over Backwards in the *BALKANS*

Dreaming of yoga, sunshine and sustainable luxury? Then catch the next flight to increasingly eco-conscious Croatia. Here's one refined retreat not to be missed.

By Danae Mercer





“I still haven’t fully discovered how it works, but when I practice yoga, I feel more centred,” says Milda Urban, the striking blonde founder of Summersalt Yoga. “Even though I live in a place that’s super chilled, I’m kind of anxious. You have work, stress, and doing yoga just balances things physically.”

Three years ago, ex-journalist Urban launched Summersalt Yoga on Vis Island in Croatia. It was, some might argue, an unusual choice. Closed from the 1950s to 1989 to foreign visitors, Vis is sleepy and quiet. It lacks the central buzz of Dubrovnik or the luxe party vibe of Hvar. And yet the silence, the way the marina is filled with sounds of waves lapping against the pier, the great expanses of empty nature, are all what give Vis its uniquely serene appeal — one perfectly suited for a week-long yoga retreat.

The retreat is structured as seasoned retreat-visitors would expect. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are catered for, consisting of simple but simply exquisite fare cooked by Urban. Yoga happens twice a day, with a vigorous flow-focused session in the morning and a yin session as the sun sets. People arrive and depart at the same time. But by throwing in a few clever additions — a luxury villa with its own private plunge pool, SUP boards and bikes to use at whim, airy modern rooms, and coffee and tea upon request — Urban has given the traditional yoga retreat an upgraded feel.

Between yoga sessions, guests chat in the lounge area, a slick space filled with plush couches and natural light from ocean-facing windows. While the villas tend to change with the retreat, Urban expects the next Croatia programme to have two options: a roughly 300-year-old villa along Vis’ small promenade that offers historical luxury; and a super-modern new build with gorgeous views.

Retreat numbers are kept deliberately low. “I like how yoga — I know it’s a little cheesy — but it unites people. There’s a connection. In society, there’s this idea that ‘I’m a strong person, I don’t need anyone’. Then you come here and find people who are also like you. You connect. It’s a community,” says Urban.

Activities are included several times during the week, including a visit to a nearby Instagram-worthy cove and a historic tour of Vis’s promenade. Some guests go on long walks through Vis’s rolling — and pretty much traffic-free — streets during the warm afternoons. There’s even a special evening meal at a family-owned fish-focused restaurant, where heaped plates of octopus and rice are joined with rich wine and spirits, all served on wood tables under the stars.

As for sustainability? “It’s something we’re actively focusing on,” says Urban. “Currently our food is sourced from Vis or the nearby area. We recycle extensively. We do little things like saving water, saving electricity and not having things blasting all night long.”

Future goals include donating part of the profits to a UNICEF charity. “We also want people to get to know the island.” Given Urban’s husband is a Croatia local and previous tour guide, the goal isn’t impossible to achieve. “It’s allowing guests to experience local tourism, not offering them something that’s bought from god knows where.”

Ultimately, like most yoga retreats, this one is comfortable, but not over-the-top decadent. But it’s luxurious in a more refined and basic way, doing what it does extremely well. There’s good, fresh food, great teachers, stunning natural surroundings, an ethical focus and a small-community feel. What more could you ask for?

Retreats run throughout the year in Croatia and Thailand. summer-saltyoga.com.