

***Bienvenidos!** As host for your upcoming retreat here, I want to personally welcome you to what we hope you find to be a most extraordinary visit. Following is the story of Yelapa, Sky Temple, and my spiritual journey here that continues to unfold, inspiring me with new marvels and vistas every day. I look forward to getting to know you better during your time with us and sharing our village yoga experience with you.*

*— Judith Roth, Sky Temple Keeper*



## The Sky Temple Story: Realizing My Deepest Soulful Intention, Deep in the Heart of México

*More than a yoga retreat, Sky Temple offers visitors a “village yoga experience” that shares in the gracious hospitality of the modest, friendly people of Yelapa, México, a tiny pueblo south of Puerto Vallarta on the Pacific Coast, reached only by boat.*

**M**éxico has many enchanting destinations. The massive Mayan ruins of Chichén Itzá and Palenque. The colonial city of Guanajuato, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, surrounded by mountains where silver mines once flourished. Barrancas del Cobre, also known as Copper Canyon, with four times the area of the Grand Canyon. And there is Bacalar, the Lake of Seven Colors. But while guidebook lists of fascinating places in México can run long, one especially magical place remains a bit of a secret and often is missing: *Yelapa*.

Located about 15 miles southwest of Puerto Vallarta, Yelapa is hidden away in a small cove where the shallow El Tuito River runs down from the surrounding coastal mountains into the Pacific Ocean’s Bahía de Banderas.

**Starting point.** This seaside pueblo is home to about 1,500 people, mostly Mexicans and a few scores of year-round and seasonal expats from the U.S., Canada and elsewhere.

Much of the village rises up the cove’s southern hillside, built in part along the edge of a large stream that cascades through large boulders as it makes its way to the ocean near the small Yelapa pier. Legend has it that Yelapa’s name comes from an ancient native description “where two rivers meet the sea.”

Visitors are encouraged to walk up a paved path through the village that winds along the stream’s edge. It leads to a 40-foot waterfall and natural pool that can be most refreshing on hot summer days. For a different scene, they can also walk down to the golden sand of the cove’s wide crescent beach. It forms an apron around the blue-green waters, with several palapas that serve food and drinks during the day.



**Pre-Columbian roots.** Yelapa’s tight-knit Mexican community has roots dating back many centuries before Columbus sailed across the Atlantic. Their ancestors preceded the 1524 arrival of Spanish conquistadors led by Francisco Cortés, cousin of Hernán Cortés, México’s infamous conqueror.

Falling under the spell of the locals’ hospitality, he and his men abided their request for peace and left without enslaving them, as was the fate of the Aztecs, Mayans and many other first peoples.

Then, in 1581, King Philip II of Spain formally granted property rights to the people of Yelapa giving them full control over 25,000 hectares (about 62,000 acres) of their land. The Mexican Constitution of 1910 further protects these rights by giving Yelapa the special status of *comunidad indigena*.



This designation legally recognizes that the indigenous people have always collectively owned their land and dictates that they always will. It also makes Yelapa unique in the world: the community owns the land, not individuals. This status has helped to keep developers away and the pace of village life much like it’s been for hundreds of years. In fact, the village did not have phones or electricity until 2001. Public water and plumbing are also recent additions. Village homes use septic systems to meet their sanitation needs.

With no roads to the outside, Yelapa is best reached from Puerto Vallarta by “panga” — a small, outboard-powered water taxi that ferries 20 to 30 passengers, plus luggage and some small freight, several times each day. During the winter months, chances are good that breaching humpback whales can be seen along the way. That is how I got here back in 2004, years before Sky Temple, and it’s how our visitors still arrive and depart, too.

## How Sky Temple came to be ...

Often Sky Temple guests want to know how I was called to build a yoga retreat of this size so high on this mountain and become its “Keeper.” It’s a good question, but frankly one I can’t answer except to describe it as grace-in-action and, looking back, seeing that each step in my life’s path led me here.

In 2004, I was seeking a healing place for a dear friend, and we came to Yelapa from Seattle. How we chose Yelapa is difficult to explain. We had been here the year before to lead a yoga and birding retreat. That planted the seed of a calling that was beyond anything rational, practical or carefully planned. My intention in moving here was to offer service. I had no idea how I would do that or what lay ahead for me.



**Blind faith.** Instead of having a specific plan, I chose to trust what now seems to have been a cosmic invitation and to follow a series of circumstances that helped me let go of my comfortable life in Seattle. And, as a city person, I moved to a tropical Mexican village with no real vision of what I would be doing. Yet, with a full willingness to let this phase in my life unfold, I placed my trust in a spiritual drive that I could not understand, much less explain even now.

My first years in Yelapa were spent enjoying day-to-day living in the heart of the village. I was connecting with neighbors, working on various village projects, learning Spanish, and making big changes in my lifestyle. Having come with a background in community organizing, plus a devotion to both Aikido martial arts and yoga for most my life, I started teaching adult yoga classes in the village. I also poured my time and energies into teaching the village children yoga and helping develop a children's center, as well.

I led a yearly retreat called "Yoga & Birding" that many of my former Seattle students loved attending. This retreat grew, reaching beyond my own student base. It was a very fulfilling way of sharing yoga and the beauty of nature with many people drawn to Yelapa for this experience.

Through the deep love I felt developing for this experience of living in this village, an internal voice spoke to me. It said, "You need to create a 'village yoga experience' for people." While I listened to this voice most intently, I was puzzled by how it would happen. But happen it did.

**Inspired by children.** My first casa in the center of town had a terrace facing the sea. I taught adults six classes of yoga a week on that terrace, surrounded by village life. My front yard became a place for a weekly village children's yoga class at 6:00 p.m. every Monday evening. None of the village children had ever attended a regular extracurricular class like this before.

Having been a highly enthusiastic camp counselor, and with years of experience teaching martial arts to children, I could hardly wait to throw my mats down in the middle of the village with the kids and see what would happen! I knew that this wildly active bunch of kids would force me to make my classes as fun, fast-moving, and challenging as possible.

My front yard was set dead center in the village, with everyone walking past it several times each day. So when these classes were held, an audience of villagers — parents, grandparents and, of course, teenage boys heckling the class — formed to watch. The children's class quickly filled with up to 25 kids of all ages. Dogs roamed among us. With the entire village seeing me consistently teaching yoga every Monday evening, the villagers were assured that my love, intentions, enthusiasm, and willingness to take on a challenge to benefit the community were authentic.

**Making it happen.** Much as I enjoyed living in the village, health issues in 2007 led me to realize that I needed to move to its outskirts, but I didn't know where. At this point, my calling to build a "village yoga experience" had become stronger than ever. Incredible as it still seems to me, I decided to lease an amazing piece of land on a hillside east of the village and began planning what became Sky Temple.

To make it happen, I was surrounded by the love of my closest friends who came together to help. Their generosity included architectural design, financial resources, sharing of a vision and a steadfast belief in me. We broke ground in 2008 and finished in 2009. During this time, they helped me face the all-consuming experience of building on a mountain, especially without the conveyance of trucks.

Materials were all shipped by small boats from Puerto Vallarta and carried by men and burros up the mountain. Sand for the concrete came in sacks, shoveled from the El Tuito River. Beams and lumber were milled by hand from the insect-proof wood of trees cut from the jungle. I am forever indebted to Felipe Garcia, who was my construction foreman, and continues as my partner in Sky Temple's operations, including all maintenance and repairs. His lovely wife Orelia has become Sky Temple's principal cook.



**Radical step.** During this time, I began working with my neighbors to create the village yoga experience. Sky Temple is a big departure from most existing retreat centers, which typically reside apart from the surrounding community in order to better manage the guest experience. In contrast, the Sky Temple’s village yoga experience is designed to impart a glimpse into living within Yelapa’s unique community while also practicing yoga in Sky Temple’s extraordinary setting.

My intention is to create a feeling of unity with both nature and the native community. Groups coming to Yelapa have come to understand that this experience is about the walking, climbing, immersing in nature and the village and, of course, doing yoga. Their teachers infuse their yoga instruction with their knowledge and the expansive broadening of understanding that the village setting offers.

Like the land beneath it, Sky Temple is spiritually owned by the community of Yelapa. As such, I am merely the “keeper” of it, humbly minding it for the enjoyment of visitors and villagers alike. It is our hope that when our visitors return to their homes and communities far from here that they take with them, safe in their hearts, as much of Yelapa’s treasured soul as they can.

Then we ask that they share that with their family, friends, associates and neighbors in the form of simply a smile, a kind word, or a compassionate gesture. In that way, the “village yoga experience” can reach beyond Yelapa and help in a modest way to make the world a more just and peaceful place for all. ■



***As visitors arrive to Sky Temple, even before they enter, they will notice a beautiful mosaic — the Peace Prayer Wall, we call it — in the hillside retaining wall behind the facility’s structure. This was created in 2016 to both celebrate and commemorate those who have had a hand in building and sustaining Sky Temple. Each tile, shell, bead and glass or mirror piece has a soulful story, someone’s prayer, behind it. Sky Temple worked with Yelapa villagers in 2017 to build a similar Peace Prayer Wall in the heart of their community.***