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Ayurvedic immersion at ANANDA SPA



ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF ANANDA IN THE HIMALAYAS

I confess, I have never been to India, the holy grail of all intrepid travellers. Sure, I've done yoga, even drunk Chai tea but the closest I have come to an Indian spa is the constant flow of warm oil on my forehead during a Shirodhara treatment at the I-Spa in Hong Kong. They say it's tranquil, I say it was annoying.

Ananda Spa assures me there is more to Ayurvedic Medicine than an oily scalp which is why I have made the trek to Rishikesh, the traditional home of yoga, in the foothills of the Indian Himalayas. Half an hour up the road sits the palatial digs of Ananda, a retreat that welcomes Bollywood royalty, Hollywood heavyweights, Fortune 500s and anyone looking for spiritual enlightenment without the struggle.

DAY ONE

The contrast between the filthy streets of Rishikesh lined with beggars waiting patiently outside Ashrams for scraps of food and the rich landscaped lawns of Ananda leave me slightly unsettled. India's 1.3 billion population may be leading the world in wealth growth but the divide between the haves and have nots confronts my middle class upbringing. Still, if given the choice I would rather be behind these gates not in front of them.

Entering Ananda's Maharaja's Vice Regal palace where I am checked in for my week, I can almost feel the thousands of years of chanting, meditation and healing that has taken place on this land. A traditional Hindu 'Aarti' welcome ritual of burning incense

and spiritual neck beads gets under the soul in an instant and I am surprised to feel the sting of moisture behind my eyes. Surely the result of weary travel, no?

I am late so I dine in my super swanky digs after a soothing bath with the lights of Rishikesh on the Ganges River twinkling outside my guest room window before passing out in a restless slumber.

DAY TWO

A gentle knock on my door awakens me and I am presented with a pot of freshly brewed honey, ginger and lemon tea. When 'retreating' I am used to early morning wake up calls for long hikes up pointy hills and a good sweat before a breakfast of fruit and cardboard toast. Not the case at Ananda.



Each guest is given freshly laundered tunic style Kurta pyjamas in pristine white. They are replaced twice a day as guests meander the grounds in comfort. It takes the status game play out of mingling with guests, though many style their own with neck beads, pashminas and elaborate slippers.

Today I am to meet 'the doctor'. Each guest is given an Ayurvedic consultation to determine the week ahead. Like most women I would like to lose weight, whether I need to or not, and like most women I envisage deprivation as part of that process.

The doctor asks me a series of questions that will diagnose my 'dosha' or ayurvedic mind and body type. These are split between three types (Vata, Pita and Kapha) that sound more like fraternity names of a US college than an actual diagnosis. Apparently we all have the three dosha types but the proportion determines our dominant dosha.

I answer the questions, but am sceptical as it feels more like a Cosmopolitan quiz than a genuine medical examination. Vata is the type of air, these types tend to be slim, excitable, impulsive, imaginative, always changing. They are erratic and if out of balance are anxious with elimination issues, upset tummies and headaches. When in balance Vatas are strong, mentally alert and creative.

Pitta is about fire. These types can be controlling, they can experience rage and envy, they are well built and strong, organised, demanding and in love with a

challenge. If balanced they will be ambitious and decisive with a healthy appetite.

Kapha focuses on water and earth and these types are usually broader in structure and calm in spirit. They are kind and gentle and health issues will be focused around moisture with sinus, obesity and depression. I immediately self diagnose myself as Pitta only to be told I am Vata with a Pitta influence as I swing from hot to cold, am passionate but always on the move. I am told to follow the Vata Pitta menu in the restaurant, though there is no mention of how I am to lose weight while dining on a diet rich in oils and wholegrain breads.

Immediately I am anxious without a strict diet regime and an exercise programme that pounds me into oblivion. The doctor suggests I spend more time in the 24,000 square foot spa and less time in the gym and see what it does for me. I can feel my blood pressure rise immediately.

DAY THREE

After a meditation session the night before in the Palace attic followed by room service and a good night's sleep I am ready for the early morning trek that awaits me. Denesh is my guide and regales me with tales of his childhood in the local town, his arranged marriage, his son and new child on the way as we make the three hour trek to the peak of the hills behind Ananda.

It is good to get moving as we wind our

way through mustard fields and family farms towards the Kunjapuri Temple where I am promised vistas of snow capped Himalayan mountains. While hundreds of thousands of Indians get about their business on the valley floor we sit quietly at the temple, dining on picnic boxes brought to us by an Ananda butler who will be driving us back down. This is retreating in style.

I feel the first layer of urban stress melt away as I finally relax. The spa at Ananda is purpose-built to reduce stress. Spa attendants ensure fresh slippers, robes, hair products and more are available at hand. A sauna, steam room, plunge pool and walking reflexology rock pool mean I spend all my spare time within these walls.

My week long spa programme is a mix of both Ayurvedic treatments with two therapists at a time, one on one yoga and Tibetan massage rituals to the sound of chanting monks.

Twice a day the retreat offers philosophical discussions with Vedanta masters who reveal an enlightened way of life. I partake in one session to some lively banter about when enough is enough but find the choice between bed and chat is an easy one in a week where my constant urban fatigue makes way for some serious nanna naps.

DAY FOUR

On most seven day retreats I usually hit a major urban withdrawal low around day

three. In this case I am still waiting. No headaches, no irritation, just a desire to relax and sleep. I don't feel deprived in the restaurant and have been ordering spa cuisine room service nightly for dinner in an effort to retreat and cocoon away from the masses. Not that there are masses here, guests can actively seek out company with group activities or leave yourself alone.

I can't psychologically let go of the need to exercise for weight loss, despite my daily trekking activities I still find myself in the gym on the treadmill for an hour a day but that may have more to do with the gym attendant who loves the challenge of stretching me from concrete to putty after each workout.

India impacts travellers in different ways. Some come trying to find themselves in this ancient land but more often lose themselves even more. Others are humbled by the blatant poverty, others ignore the poverty and see the country as one giant gold bullion bar there for the business picking.

The Ganges may be the most spiritual body of water in India but it is far from the cleanest. Denesh and I take a trip to Rishikesh for the nightly Ganga Aarati but not before he takes me to a secluded river beach to bless myself in the waters which I sprinkle over my head with my mouth firmly closed.

The Aarati is a joyous singing celebration of life held by a local Ashram with spiritual gurus on the banks of the river. It is impossible not to be moved by the shining orphans who clap and sing and beat their drums and there is a collective feeling of harmony among the hundreds of strangers who congregate here nightly. Surely these people who have nothing in the material world are far happier than I who appear to have everything on the outside?

DAY FIVE

I have fallen into a ginger, lemon and honey tea morning routine, happy in my kurta pyjamas with spa attendants as my new best friends. I don't feel a physical change but I do feel moved under the skin,

I arrived restless and have transitioned to contemplative, though am not sure yet this is a good thing.

Today is another day of trekking with Denesh. This time we drive for hours through winding hills, passed crops tended by women in rich coloured saris. Then we start trekking, through seriously poverty stricken villages where elderly women invite us in for tea. On we trek higher and higher until we can see the Himalayas on the horizon covered in white November snow.



We stop at the town of New Tehri, named as Old Tehri now sits under water after the government dammed the region. The town feels carved into the side of the hill, more reminiscent of Italy than India with picturesque views of the blue lake and hills thrusting skyward. We, or rather I, am the only westerner as we peruse the local market before running into Denesh's uncle who invites us to his home for lunch.

Indian's are hospitable folk, they may not have a dime to rub together but they will offer it to you first if you so desire. We dine on traditional spinach and fetta and finish with masala chai and a tour of the vegetable garden before the winding drive home and more spa treatments.

DAY SIX

I have been pummelled and scrubbed, stretched and released daily. The Ayurvedic therapists are kind, caring and gentle with true compassion and empathy for this decadent overindulged westerner before them. What right do I have for tears when the beggars in the streets of Rishikesh are

stepped over like cracks in the pavement? Yet tears come, how can they not in India even with the protective walls of Ananda?

The General Manger, Anapum, lives in the Maharaja's son's home down the road from Ananda and I have been invited for tea with his wife and daughter. Mark, the spa manager, accompanies me as we step into an art deco era of high ceilings, antique furniture and cucumber sandwiches minus the crusts.

The women of India fascinate me and Anapum's wonderful wife is no different. Educated, vocal, kind and funny we discuss the history of her country and the plight of women in a nation where they can be prime ministers one day and burned with acid by their husbands the next.

It would appear my retreat has been a thought provoking one with no need of weight telling scales. Sometimes cleansing is not always physical.

DAY SEVEN

I leave the way I arrived with an Arti ceremony. Ananda Spa may be visually stunning but it is the people that work here that make the difference from the smiling chefs to the talkative waiters, the caring spa attendants, the yogis and the masters.

As the traditional farewell ceremony of burning incense and the tying on of coloured string to the wrist takes place amongst a short chant, I find myself again tearing over. www.anandaspa.com

need to know

Ananda Spa is a member of Preferred Hotels and Resorts www.preferredhotels.com

GETTING THERE:

Thai Airways flies from Bangkok to New Delhi with Kingfisher Airlines flying daily from Delhi to Dehradun. Ananda Spa is an hour's drive from Dehradun's Jolly Gant airport. Flights can be booked online with no booking fees on Zuji.com www.thaiairways.com www.flykingfisher.com www.zuji.com