

TRAVEL + LEISURE

INDIA & SOUTH ASIA

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t+l spa special MIND BODY

WELLNESS HAVEN

THERE ARE SOME PLACES WHERE REPUTATIONS PRECEDE EXPERIENCES AND SOUKYA, ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF BANGALORE, WAS ONE OF THOSE RARE GEMS FOR MALA BARUA WHO CHECKS INTO THIS AWARD-WINNING HOLISTIC CENTRE AND COMES AWAY IMPRESSED.



THE BRAINCHILD OF DR. ISAAC MATHAI and his nutritionist wife Suja, Soukya has come a long way since it opened in 2002. The centre has grown enormously and is considered India's only holistic health centre providing alternative healthcare that includes Ayurveda, homeopathy and naturopathy, along with complimentary therapies like acupuncture, mud therapy, hydrotherapy and reflexology. It was recently awarded the Best Wellness Centre in 2010 from the Government of India, and Dr. Mathai himself is a contributor to several think tanks on health and wellness and founded the Soukya Foundation that runs several charitable and free clinics.

Being in the profession of wellness myself, I was curious to see why this famous destination was creating such a buzz. Dr. Mathai does not like the word "spa" to describe his place. He believes he offers much more in the area of healing than ordinary spas. His holistic approach views the person as a whole—mind, body and spirit. It takes into consideration the psychological,

nutritional, emotional, social, cultural, lifestyle, environmental, and spiritual aspects in health and illness. Man after my own heart, I thought as I boarded the plane to Bangalore.

Upon my arrival at the airport, I was gladly received by a chauffeur-driven Mercedes Benz. It was Dr. Mathai's private car and a nice personal touch indeed. In less than half an hour, we arrived at the centre's rather grand entrance. The architecture was pleasing and reflected the South Indian traditional style. I was offered a refreshing green coconut welcome drink and shown to my villa, one of the 25 residences in the centre. But most of all, I was excited to sample Soukya's famous treatment menu.

BLISSFULLY SOAKED IN OIL

On my first day there, I was given a very thorough questionnaire to fill up, not only on my physical health but questions that could bring out my emotional baggage too. If I didn't have a handle on my life, I am sure I would have easily poured my heart out to the very understanding senior physician Dr. Shuba R. I was offered their introductory Soukya Signature

BANGALORE BLISS
The imposing entrance to Soukya Holistic Health Centre, in Bangalore.

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Hot Stone Therapy, which is a blend of Eastern and Western massage techniques using Ayurvedic oils. Interesting, I thought. Was my experience in Soukya going to be a hotchpotch of East and West? I haven't come to the country's premier holistic centre for a hot stone therapy. I wanted the real thing. Be patient. I had to tell myself.

I declined the fusion offer and asked for something more authentic instead. Dr. Shuba suggested Shirodhara for the enhancement of the function of my pituitary gland and Choornaswedam for joint pains, weight loss and relaxation. Perfect, I thought. After all my travelling, my joints could do with some oiling. So for the next two hours I had the most amazing hot oil pouring from side to side on my forehead and down my tresses. I abandoned myself totally into this oily process, knowing that it was good for me and that I could wash it off with the gooey *channe-ke-dal* homemade shampoo. After the Shirodhara experience, two gentle South Indian girls stabbed my body with hot herbal packs that felt so good, I didn't want it to end. All the medicinal herbs are locally grown in the surrounding gardens of the property. I was impressed.

That afternoon I met with Dr. Mathai and his wife Suja, who takes care of the hospitality side of the business. We exchanged ideas and I felt touched by the sincerity and genuineness of the couple's passion for their product. I had first met Dr. Mathai while attending the Mind & Life conference in Delhi presided over by the Dalai Lama, B.K.S. Iyengar and several other prominent personalities from the world of health, healing and spirituality. During one of the tea breaks, I had noticed an elegant looking man dressed in a suit (unusual for the event) sitting by himself on the table next to mine, and that's how we got chatting. Coming from a family tradition of homeopathic doctors, in his early years, he studied and practised in Europe's largest holistic healthcare clinic. Subsequently, 25 years of treating patients from over 60 countries culminated in his dream, Soukya, which he uses as a platform to offer a high quality integrative healthcare service that attracts the likes of Deepak Chopra, Dr. Andrew Weil and several other eminent names.



LAP OF NATURE
Clockwise from top left:
At Soukya, the country's
leading holistic centre; in
the retreat's grounds;
inside a villa.

Later during dinner in the open-air dining room, I met an eclectic mix of people from all over the world. Some were here to simply detox but others were here with specific medical problems. There were lawyers from Switzerland, Buddhists from the U.S., the prince of Nicobar and other interesting people. We talked of the *satvic* (pure) cuisine that Suja put together in the menu and envied each other's portions where there were restrictions. I had opted for a no-carb diet but those *appams* looked amazing.

THE LOURDES PRAYER

Next morning at 7 a.m., I attended their yoga session. It was well delivered but a bit basic in order to include beginners. The open-air yoga hall was pasted with Gujarati mirrorwork giving it an ethereal air. After yoga at 9 a.m. sharp every morning, the entire staff of doctors, nurses and therapists assemble together to say the Lord's Prayer. I was invited to join them for this morning session and was impressed to find out that Dr. Mathai, dashing as ever in his crisp dark suit, personally attends the morning prayer everyday. It was a nice bonding time for the entire staff.

After a breakfast of fruits and an orange, apple and ginger juice, I went for my second

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HOLISTIC HIDEAWAY
From left: The casual lounge; the open-air yoga pavilion.

session of treatments. I headed past the pool, which lay temptingly unused due to the cool weather. A slight drizzle sprayed gently on my face as I walked along the pretty pathways meandering through the villas to the treatment rooms. Today, I confessed to Dr. Shuba, that I had suffered from a heel spur from walking too much and would be grateful if she could recommend something to relieve this symptom. The Ayurvedic specialist, Dr. Ajitha, was called in who immediately told me I was a Vata personality. How did she know I asked? By the way I spoke, she said. She was spot on. I travel like the wind and yes, I am a Vata personality! Starting with an Abhyanga massage for 45 minutes, my feet then got a treatment called Arkapatra Swedam—a most beautiful treatment of two herbal packs dipped in very hot medicinal oil that were wrapped around my feet while the therapists gently massaged the soles of my feet. Every five minutes, the packs were dipped into the boiling Ayurvedic oil to maintain the temperature. The treatment was special. As everyone knows that according to reflexology, in massaging the feet every organ of the body gets massaged. I slipped into my own cocoon, feeling loved and cared for by the tenderness with which my feet were being treated. It was truly an amazing experience.

MEMORIES, DREAMS AND REFLECTIONS

Later in the day, I caught up with Dr. Mathai once again and he shared his dreams, challenges, and vision with me. He explained how his centre also avails of the services of the allopathic facilities available in Bangalore when required. On a tour of the premises I came across pictures of Camilla Parker Bowles when, for the first time ever, she broke protocol to stay at the centre for five days instead of the normal three days. I was shown around the herbal gardens and also the medicine



kitchen. Huge cauldrons of oil were being extracted and treated for use in the centre and were being neatly bottled and labelled. I was also shown the Presidential Suite where Bowles stayed with her daughters, along with the deluxe and super deluxe rooms with private gardens, and the "silent" room.

I returned to my room post dinner and from my own garden, watched the moonlight in the quiet of my private villa. This was my last evening so I wrote to myself, about the changes I wanted to make in all aspects of my life. This was the objective of Soukya—to make you reflect, bring in changes into your lifestyle, and care for your health.

Next morning, as I was leaving, I watched a group of new patients being wheeled in. This reminded me a lot of the miracle healings at Lourdes in France. Not surprising that Dr. Mathai has a statue of the Madonna (from Lourdes) looking down on a fountain just outside his office. He has done a great job of bringing all the traditional alternative healing modules under one roof, set in a modern day luxury environment. Just what the doctor ordered!

Soukya Rd., Samethanahalli, Whitefield, Bangalore;
91-80/2801-7000; soukya.com; singles from Rs 9,900. ✦