


Condé Nast Traveller

in association with
Healing  Holidays

THE SPA GUIDE 2017

ANONYMOUS CONFESSION

THIS FEELING INSIDE

THE INDIVIDUAL

A MAN WHOSE LIFE-LONG WEIGHT ISSUES HAVE MADE HIM DEFENSIVE AND CYNICAL - AND WHO HAS NEVER EVEN ATTENDED A YOGA CLASS BEFORE

I am slick with medicated oil, wearing only a paper pouch as two men pray, then begin to vigorously squelch and pummel me on a leatherette day bed. I am starting to giggle, and they start giggling too. I am in Bangalore, it is day two of seven, and I am pretty sure this is not your average spa. It also happens that I am not a natural spa man. To be honest, it has taken some doing just to take my clothes off. I have always been pretty fat and inevitably I've developed mechanisms to deal with it, such as self-disparagement. Then, after years of just not trying to be thinner, I woke up in January and decided I would try, and to my amazement, I carried on trying. It is November now, and three of the four excess stone are gone, but the cynicism about my body and my control of it lingers. So, as the Christmas glut heaves into view, I realise I need to deal with my body and my attitude to it or face a reversal.

Of all places, India is surely the least cynical. I love its chaos, gentleness and kind humour - and I speak as someone who has been mugged here. So, arriving at Soukya at dawn, leaving behind the sleepy roadside chai sellers selling morning tea, I suspect I am also leaving the India I know and love. Soukya looks immaculate, a modern Mogul garden of psychotropical colour comprising the campus of Dr Mathai's International Holistic Health Centre. Out of the exotic trees and flowers, the yoga space, treatment pavilions, dining rooms and guest bungalows emerge. Gardens for medicinal plants and vegetables, sheds with mooing cattle, medicine-production facilities, water storage, solar panels and that all-important oil-slick production area, make the estate almost self-sufficient.

Soukya runs a full range of holistic health provision, but its backbone is a combination of Ayurveda, naturopathy, yoga and intensive panchakarma, a lengthy detoxifying and cleansing programme. I am here for seven days, so the three-week hardcore course is not possible. It seems I have escaped the forced vomiting. Soukya runs two streams of traditional therapies: preventative medical (that's me), and therapies for specific illnesses such as lung disease, back pain, addiction or depression. I soon find out from other guests the miracles that have been worked on them here, and on a long-term basis too. I am both moved and impressed.

I am shown to a sparsely decorated but lovely bungalow with a private garden. I unpack, and then go to my session

THE REMEDY

A NO-HOLDS-BARRED STARVATION DETOX AT SOUKYA IN INDIA, WITH HARDWARE CLEANSSES THAT INVOLVE SNORTING PETROL AND AN OIL ENEMA

with the Ayurvedic doctor where I am diagnosed as a hot person - irritable, acidic, sleepless, with a slow metabolism and low blood pressure, prone to diabetes, fatigue, and with bipolar leanings. The cure? Strip, paper pants, dust down with ashes, pour on hot oil, smash herbals in, rub vigorously. Two hours later I am basted and wasted. It has been

both strenuous and strange.

I reluctantly get up at 6am for my first-ever yoga class. Incredibly, I enjoy it. I am then seen by the naturopathy doctor, who puts me on a fasting diet as part of the detox. I steel myself and go for her prescribed initial colonic. Heartened by my yogic triumph, I am now resolved to do everything on offer. This is further helped by then meeting the charismatic Dr Mathai. Across a large desk he tells me that my neck, shoulders and posture are awful and alters my treatment programme to take in a few elements of panchakarma. So my days settle into a rhythm of yoga; a liquid breakfast; intense Ayurvedic oil therapy, liver packs, a water enema; then soup and buttermilk for lunch. Panchakarma therapies come next: the first is for my sinus (snorting chillies and petrol followed by a lot of spitting); the second is an oil enema, packed with panchakarmic medicine; another liver pack, an hour of reflexology and lastly meditative yoga, after which I quick-step back to the room to 'relax' until liquid dinner and bed. I am surprising myself. The enemas are mortifying but I can cope. Even hanging out in the paper pouch is losing some of its alarm. The fasting is manageable, although I do feel down in the evenings, and have stupid, unsettling dreams about food. But I start to go on walks, pausing to look at flowers and birds. I get to day seven and I weigh 10 pounds less than when I arrived. And I'm fitter, my yogic breathing feels deeper and my posture is stronger. When it's time to leave, my two therapists/brethren wave me off with a supply of Ayurvedic medicine for my metabolism, and a written plan for the next few months.

It turns out this place is very much what I like about India. It is expert and even visionary, but remains touchingly human. Particularly the therapists, who accompanied me all week with their warm efficiency and care, have somewhat unbundled my attitude to my body image. I have a sense of both achievement and positivity, and a fondness for this place, and perhaps even for myself. Cynic? Me?

BOOK IT HEALING HOLIDAYS (+44 20 7843 3592; HEALINGHOLIDAYS.CO.UK/CONDENAST) OFFERS SEVEN NIGHTS AT SOUKYA FROM £3,450 PER PERSON, INCLUDING FLIGHTS, TRANSFERS, MEALS, DIETARY ADVICE AND ALL TREATMENTS AND ACTIVITIES AS PER THE PROGRAMME. HEALING HOLIDAYS EXCLUSIVE RECEIVE A COMPLIMENTARY AYURVEDIC REJUVENATING TREATMENT