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OUT OF THIS WORLD: THE
ANANDA SPA SITS IN THE
FOOTHILLS OF THE HIMALAYAS

MOUNTAIN POSE

It might seem a long way to go to practise your sun salutations – but when Carole Beck beat a retreat to the birthplace of yoga in northern India, she emerged with her soul soothed and a stronger body

It turns out there's more to yoga than downward dog. In fact, there are five essential elements of yoga, according to ancient Indian yogic wisdom. The first are the yoga postures, known as asanas. Then there's pranayama breathing, a type of yogic breath control; savasana, the much-needed rest at the end of your workout; and a healthy – preferably vegetarian – diet.

The fifth yogic element focuses on meditation and positive thinking. Some Hindu gurus consider this the most important of the five – after all, we are what we think, or so they say. By following yoga, it's thought you can develop a positive outlook and bring harmony to your life.

It's fair to say the yoga programme at India's five-star spa resort Ananda, in the Himalayas, aims to tick off all five – so your menu, mind and mood are nurtured here, not just your mountain pose. But this is no hard-mattress, rise-at-5am ashram. The hotel, set in the grounds of a maharajah's palace in the lowland Himalayas, offers luxury with its asanas.

My room was sumptuous with cool linen, comfy pillows and even a bath menu. Every evening, a healthy Indian delicacy was placed on my bed, accompanied by a motivational message. The balcony had a sweeping view of the sacred River Ganges and, far below, the town of Rishikesh, said by many devotees to be the birthplace of yoga.

The main guest building is a short walk from the imposing, golden-hued palace, along pathways planted with exotic spider lilies and scented with night jasmine. Other rooms overlook the palace gardens, while there's the option of suites and guesthouses, complete with private pool and butler. This is one of India's most famous health resorts and an international centre for ayurveda. It's made it a celebrity draw, with Bollywood and Hollywood royalty, including Uma Thurman and Oprah Winfrey, among previous guests.

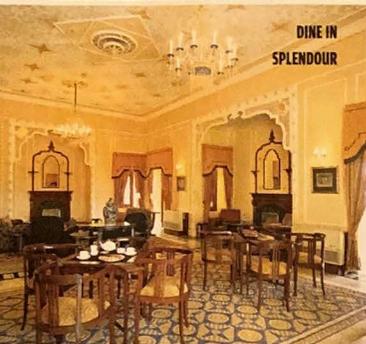
LOOK OUT FOR TIGERS

The adventure starts once you leave the local airport, an hour's flight north of Delhi. Passing dusty roadside stalls selling tropical fruits, masala chai tea and pakoras, the road cuts through Rajaji National Park, a stretch of forest where elephants, leopards and tigers roam wild. Dotted along the verge are road signs warning of wild animals crossing. I kept my eyes peeled, especially for the tigers, but never saw them.

On arrival, my first appointment was with the on-site ayurvedic doctor, who identified my dosha. According to this ancient Indian healing science, we are all one of three primary doshas – vata, pitta or kapha – each of which is associated with different characteristics, including body type and personality traits. It's thought your health is affected when they're



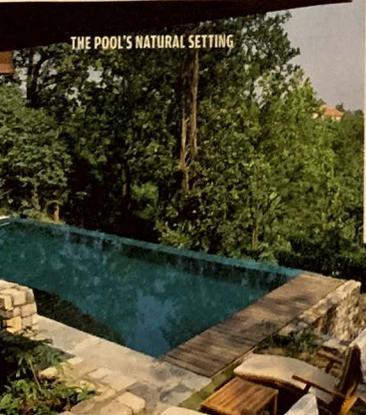
STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN:
THE PALACE GARDENS



DINE IN
SPLENDOUR



FOOD IS TAILORED TO YOUR DOSHA



THE POOL'S NATURAL SETTING

out of balance. My treatment schedule and diet tweaked accordingly for my pitta diagnosis, it was time for my first personalised yoga session.

All the yoga teachers at Ananda are trained at the Bihar School of Yoga, and teach hatha – the mama of yoga styles. The classes were back-to-basics, so no show-off poses, but instead a focus on hip-opening positions, shoulder stands, back bends and sun salutations. It felt strong but doable. Every day, I also took a free early morning class in the garden pavilion, its walls opened to the jungle scents. I loved it.

But you don't have to be into yoga to come here – the hotel hosts several wellness programmes, including stress release, weight management, detox and ayurvedic rejuvenation. Each offers targeted treatments, plus free group sessions, such as meditation, mountain hikes and gym classes.

For the yoga programme, the sessions included the yogic breathing practice pranayama, said to relieve stress, and which made me feel so relaxed I thought I was going to nod off. In the spa, I was booked into a range of treatments, from reflexology to Indian head massage. My favourite was the Ananda fusion – the signature hot stone massage. Utter bliss.

GOURMET TREATS

The food was healthy, delicious and tailored to my ayurvedic dosha. For the pitta diet, that meant I had to avoid certain herbs and spices, and stick to a low-dairy plan.

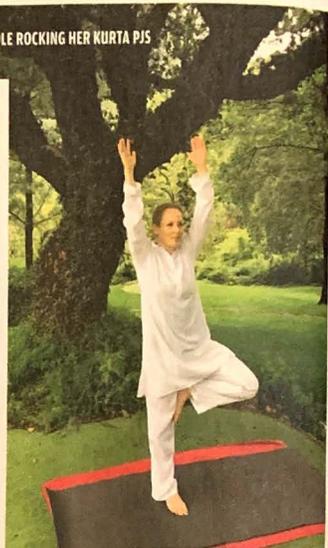
Meals ranged from Indian to Asian and Western options. There was plenty of fresh fruit and veg, farmed from the hotel's kitchen gardens in the valley, and fresh herbs picked daily from the on-site herb garden. The breakfast buffet included tropical fruits, kefir shots, and freshly squeezed juices – the green 'colon juice' felt particularly virtuous.

I loved not having to think about what to wear during my stay. The hotel provides traditional white kurta, a type of Indian cotton pyjamas, which are optional, but most people choose to wear them. I found them cool and comfortable in the humidity, even for yoga classes.

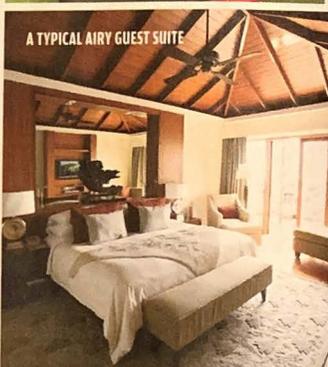
I arrived at the start of monsoon season so, while humid, it was too cloudy to enjoy the poolside sun loungers, and there were occasional torrential downpours. But the weather brought its own magic, with mists rolling down from the majestic mountains. Luckily, the hotel laid on umbrellas for downpours, plus a golf buggy to get you to the palace when it was wet. This came in handy when I was late for a yoga class...

As the days passed, I felt stronger, and full of energy. The yoga pushed my body, while the meditation and pranayama nourished my mind and sleep. As I left, I felt totally restored. I was ready for those tigers. **B**

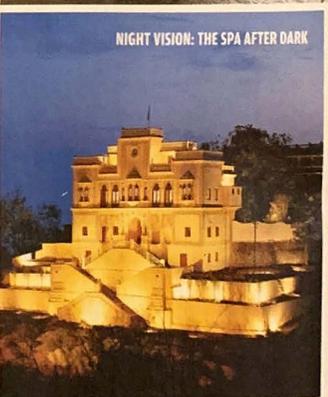
CAROLE ROCKING HER KURTA PJS



A TYPICAL AIRY GUEST SUITE



NIGHT VISION: THE SPA AFTER DARK



The yoga programme at the Ananda Spa in the Himalayas starts from around £4,100 per person, based on two sharing, for seven nights. An introductory yoga programme is from around £2,800 per person, based on two sharing, for five nights. Prices include airport transfers from Dehradun, individual wellness consultations, three meals a day, use of spa facilities, scheduled lifestyle and wellness activities, daily group yoga and meditation classes, and a comprehensive programme of therapy sessions according to the booked programme and the person's individual needs. Flights not included. For more info, visit anandaspa.com.