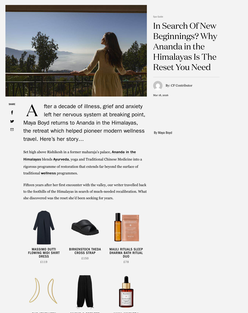


TRAVEL

In Search Of New Beginnings? Why Ananda in the Himalayas Is The Reset You Need

By CF Contributor

Mar 16, 2020

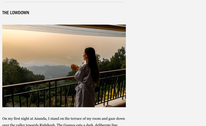
SHARE
TWEET
PIN

By Maya Boyd

After a decade of illness, grief and anxiety I left her nervous system at breaking point, Maya Boyd returns to Ananda in the Himalayas, the retreat which helped pioneer modern wellness travel. Here's her story...

Jet high above Rishikesh in a Himalayan mini-jet, **Ananda in the Himalayas** blends **Ayurveda**, yoga and Traditional Chinese Medicine into a rigorous programme of restoration that is revered by the author of traditional **wellness** programmes.

Fifteen years after first encounter with the valley, our sober-minded kick back to the foothills of the Himalayas in search of much needed revitalisation. What also discovered was the reset she'd been seeking for years.



BALMAIN DOTS FLORAL MIDI SHIRT DRESS
£89 at Farfetch

DOMESTICATED TWEEN CHAIN STRAP
£130

MAKU STRAPLESS SLEEP BRAZIER BATH ROYAL BLUE
£75

BOB JEWELLERY ROSE GOLD MOONSTONE EARRINGS
£140

MORGAN & SPENCER ROSE GOLD PLATED CHAIN
£15

SARAH ARCHER SHEER SILK CHIFFON RUFFLE-TRIMMED BLOUSE
£75

THE LONDONER

On my first night at Ananda, I stand on the terrace of my room and gaze down over the valley towards Rishikesh. The lamps onto a dark, dishevelled, Dickensian-like city. The Ganges, a ribbon of black silk, flows through it, leaving tassels and cloaks soft hanging in the air as a storm gathers over the Rishikesh hills. Earlier that evening, upon my arrival, I'd been blessed with smoke and sandalwood, green ginger tea in clay and a tasha was placed around my neck, the wooden beads cool against my collarbone. A song sounded somewhere in the distance. Half bowed, gracefully, with open palms. There is something quietly monastic about the welcome here, through the ceremony to my restorative practice, a former wayfarer's place reimagined as one of the world's most exacting wellness sanctuaries. A dramatic location indeed, but Ananda's power lies in flexibility and more so structure.

Now in its 25th year, Ananda has had time to refine that structure. Founded by hospitality veteran, Adam Sachs, and guided by his daughter, Aashka, the retreat has always positioned itself at the intersection of classical **Ayurveda**, yoga and Eastern philosophy, along with an increasingly mainstream programme of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

"Ananda's integrated approach addresses every aspect of a person – spiritual, mental, emotional and physical," Aashka declares. "The point is integration, not simply indulgence." It's a rigorous system, and that distinction matters to the many guests who, like me, do not come to Ananda for pampering. They come because they cannot continue as they are.

> It's a rigorous system, and that distinction matters to the many guests who, like me, do not come to Ananda for pampering. They come because they cannot continue as they are.

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

This is not my first visit to the valley. **Travel** has always been the aim on which my life has turned. Over the years, summers in Devon had left the untethered, months on the road kind. Childhood months in **North Africa** in a 70's camper van. Teenage **Swiss summers** wrestled in grainy Polaroid shots. Sulky summers sinking drinks in the **Côte d'Azur** during my first year away from home. A decade later, backpacking through **Southeast Asia**, camping on beaches in **Koh Samui**. Exploring **Moroccan jungles** and sleeping in the Sahara desert under a million stars. Eighteen months crossing oceans on dock crew, followed by years in the **Caribbean**, **Argentina**, **Miami**. A month spent with the indigenous Tsonga people deep in the Colombian **Amazon**. Years and years and years in **Ibiza**. Movement has been my education and the transformation has been most constant. I have never been afraid of immersion.

Then, when I first came to Rishikesh fifteen years ago with the sum-who-knows-what of my life in my backpack, I was a mess. Ravaged by years of hospitality. The heat. The noise. The collision of sensory, dread, metropolis and settling river water. I had always found solace in vacations, and in Rishikesh I felt confounded whole. My nervous system recoiled. My forehead still jolts when I'm had to moderate my back to the self-world grandeur of **New Delhi's Imperial Hotel** to revive me before we could continue our **Indian** odyssey. Rishikesh, back then, was too much for me.

Life since then has been seismic. The past decade has been defined by extremes: my oldest and a hysterectomy before where I was nine months pregnant with our second child, followed by years of chemotherapy, late effects and the constant fear of relapse. Moving back and forth between **Ibiza** and the **UK** for almost ten years as I wrote books, edited magazines and collaborated upon some highly, but also juggled anxiety, addiction issues and insomnia alongside antimonious Hashimoto's Thyroiditis and the hormonal reckoning of my mid-forties. Grief became critical. Too many Hashiebros, too young, in circumstances too brutal to make sense of. By December of last year, I was still cooking, still functioning, still mothering three young children. But it felt as though I was coming unstitched at the edges. My seven-year-old daughter drew a family picture for her Christmas card. In it, I was crying.

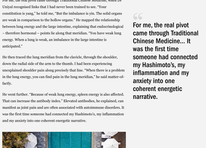
> By December of last year, I was still working, still functioning, still mothering three young children. But it felt as though I was coming unstitched at the edges. My seven-year-old daughter drew a family picture for her Christmas card. In it, I was crying.

A RETURN TO AYURVEDA

At 44, by what feels like a new beginning, I wanted recalibration rather than rescue. **Ananda** – the mother of all wellness sanctuaries – felt like she was calling me home. In the hands of the uninitiated, **Ayurveda** is often dismissed into the shorthand of **"Indian** wellness" but it is in fact a joint-year-old medical system rooted in the balance of the five elements – **earth**, water, fire, air and ether – as they express through three primary constitutions, or doshas: vata (air and ether), pitta (fire and water) and kapha (earth and water). Each person's form with a dominant constitution. Illness arises when **imbalance** occurs between the three doshas. Ayurveda, in its most ancient form, essential, Ananda's programmes are built around three pillars, the Ayurvedic science of daily rhythm, Waking before sunrise. Oil pulling. Tongue scraping. Nasal cleansing. Acting in alignment to the Sun. Moving in specific times. Resting at others. It sounds simple, but most modern lives are structured in direct opposition to the Ayurvedic science of daily rhythm. Mine felt like it had abandoned rhythm altogether and fallen to the gods of chaos.

> Most modern lives are structured in direct opposition to the Ayurvedic science of daily rhythm. Mine felt like it had abandoned rhythm altogether and fallen to the gods of chaos.

Ok actual, guests at Ananda are accepted in an Ayurvedic physician who will remain with them for the duration of their **wellness journey**. Consultations are thorough, pulse reading and tongue assessment combined with detailed questioning about digestion, sleep, emotional tendencies and medical history. The tone is measured and professional, the questions ranging on the intimate. Ayurveda is a medical system, after all, and Ananda, with its six-week focus, seems to be rank to soulful. The aim is digestion. Within 3 moments, I was recognised as a 'vata' type, which I half knew already. Wiry vata are creative, intuitive and agile, yet prone to anxiety, insomnia, digestive irregularity and nervous system overload. Vata is also, unsurprisingly, susceptible to the doshas of cold wind. When it rises unchecked, everything scatters. Mine had been running riot.



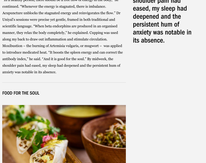
Still at Ananda's Ola Mountain

For me, the real pivot came through Traditional Chinese Medicine, when Dr Uniyal recognised Sidra that I had never been trained to see. "Your constitution is yang," he told me. "But the imbalance is yin. The solid organs are weak in the kidneys, organs in the spleen." He mapped the relationship between long-running and chronic illness, symptoms and underlying pattern – therefore hormonal – psoriasis for along that meridian, "You have seen long energy. When a long is weak, an imbalance in the opposite organ is anticipated."

He then traced the long meridian from the clavicle, through the shoulder, down the radial side of the arm to the thumb. I had been experiencing unexplained shoulder pain among practically Ibiza. "When there is a problem in the long energy, you can find pain in the lung meridian," he said matter-of-fact.

He went further. "Because of weak lung energy, spleen energy is also affected. That can increase the antibody levels." Elevated antibodies, he explained, can manifest as joint pain and are often associated with autoimmune disorders. It was the first time someone had connected my Hashimoto's, my inflammation and my anxiety into one coherent energetic narrative.

> For me, the real pivot came through Traditional Chinese Medicine... It was the first time someone had connected my Hashimoto's, my inflammation and my anxiety into one coherent energetic narrative.



Then came the emotional lens. "You try to control emotion," he observed calmly. "But you are holding anger and fear inside you. That increases the mood element, which is connected to the liver. Anger and fear combine to create anxiety." There was no mysticism in his delivery – it was pure diagnostics. It felt as simple as that. It felt true.

"In a healthy person, there should be a free flow of energy in the body." he continued. "Whenever the energy is stagnated, there is imbalance. Ayurveda calls this imbalance 'ama' and Traditional Chinese Medicine calls it 'Qi'. Uniyal's examine was precise and gentle. Rooted in both traditional and scientific language. "When beta endorphins are produced in an organised manner, they calm the body completely," he explained. Cupping was used along back to draw out inflammation and stimulate circulation. Moxibustion – the burning of Artemisia vulgaris, or mugwort – was applied to introduce medicinal heat. "It boosts the spleen energy and can correct the antibody levels," he said. "And it is good for the soul." My shoulder, the shoulder pain had eased, my sleep had deepened and the persistent hum of anxiety was notable in its absence.

> By midweek, my shoulder pain had eased, my sleep had deepened and the persistent hum of anxiety was notable in its absence.

FOOD FOR THE SOUL

It Ayurveda is the spine of Ananda, then food is its daily language. **The Healing Plates** an Ayurvedic cookbook inspired by Ananda's kitchen team's gift anniversary, drafts decades of clinical experience into recipes designed to extend the retreat's philosophy into guests' homes. The emphasis is not on elimination but alignment. Each guest **consults with the culinary team** to tailor meals to their doshas, to suggest or vary signature overnoodles, sesame, sunbeam, light and unsettled. My diet was tailored to ground that flightiness, to wrap warmth around what had been cold and unpredictable. It wasn't about restriction – although meals are intentionally light – it was about rhythm and listening. For me, this meant warm, cooked, grounding dishes – mung bean kitchari with ghee, dal, slow-cooked vegetables tempered with cumin and fresh curry leaves, herbs designed to support digestive fire without overstimulating it. As someone who normally runs from food, snarling up, straight from the fridge, this was a revelation.

THE TO-DO LIST

One morning we hiked up to Kunjapuri Temple, a holy place high in the Himalaya foothills of Uttarkhanda. At the summit, mantra blessed us with incense and marigold petals as men sipped peaks out of a jagged line across the horizon and prayed flag fluttered above the valley floor. The setting echoed the retreat's philosophy that Ananda is not about isolated luxury but about embedded spirituality, found daily in small rituals, small revelations, small moments of gratitude. Some days, in the full between treatments, I found myself on the grass beneath the jacaranda trees, watching a praying mantis balance gently on a branch, Or kneeling in front of a garlanded statue of Ganesha as he quietly contemplated the world. Or sitting, hands together, in pure thank-devotion. In these quiet hours, in the cool Himalayan air, I felt the fragmentation of the previous decade begin to heal back together.

By the last evening at Ananda, I knew I needed to visit the river once more. But the great lungs on the far shore, looking up over the tree-lined road, I felt an urge to return to Rishikesh. Ananda's rhythms were crooked – bodies and voices and flames and smoke – and a wild street had set Rishikesh's famous suspension bridge swaying dramatically. Mountain rain lashed into our faces. Yet when