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In your ELEMENT

Luxury wellness retreat Ananda in the Himalayas is the ideal place to embrace India's holistic approach to physical and mental well-being

By Divya Haribala

Once upon a time, the maharaja of Tehri Garhwal discovered a beautiful piece of land in the foothills of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand, India. It was here that he built the stunning Viceregal Palace, which played host to heads of state from India and abroad, including Britain's Lord Mountbatten.

Long after the British Raj had disappeared, an entrepreneur stumbled upon this magical place. He decided to transform the estate and its lush surroundings into a sanctuary of wellness that celebrated ancient Indian virtues and holistic living. Ananda in the Himalayas was born.

The country's first luxury wellness retreat, it celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2025, and over the years has hosted a fittingly illustrious clientele, including celebrities and royalty such as Oprah Winfrey, Melinda French Gates and King Charles.

The resort is reached via a 40-minute domestic flight from Delhi, followed by a beautiful, winding drive up through the mountains. Upon entering through its golden gates, it's as though you've been transported to a different world. The main reception area is housed in the palace annex, while the resort is spread across 40 hectares of forest, home to rare birds and >>

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The Pavilion is Ananda's casual eatery



Yoga at Ananda in the Himalayas

baboons (only 15 per cent is developed). The grounds include an outdoor yoga pavilion, amphitheatre, walking track and even a six-hole golf course. The views take in two of India's spiritual landmarks: yoga mecca Rishikesh and a section of the holy Ganges River. Even if you do not believe in the mystical, it's hard not to feel the energy that permeates the place.

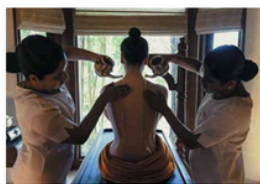
The resort's 75 rooms and suites are clustered around the main complex, with three free-standing villas - each with its own deck and pool - set apart for added privacy. The Viceregal Suite, with its period four-poster bed, is located in the palace. My recently renovated suite is elegant with colourful design touches, but the real hero is the expansive balcony with panoramic views of Rishikesh as it lights up the sky each evening.

Ananda's core practices are rooted in Ayurveda, yoga and Vedanta (an ancient system of Hindu philosophy), and it has expanded its offerings over the years to encompass physiotherapy, emotional healing and traditional Chinese medicine. The focus remains more holistic than medical, with new programmes addressing women's health, fertility and weight loss. The kitchen can serve up to 300 different menu items daily. Guests are encouraged to commit to a minimum of seven days for any comprehensive programme, while those undergoing panchakarma - traditional Ayurvedic detox therapy - can stay for as long as two months.

My first order of business is a doctor's consultation in the 24,000 sq ft spa, which houses facilities such as a Kneipp pool, a sauna and steam room, a gym and a Slim Aarons-worthy outdoor pool. The main restaurant nearby features a stunning alfresco deck under a canopy of towering trees.

As I'm walking over, I realise that everyone is dressed in identical white kurta pyjamas, which are given to guests to wear during their stay. I'm not sure if I want to look like I'm part of a cult - albeit a very elegant one - but once I change, I feel more relaxed and serene. Full disclosure: I barely changed out of them for the rest of the trip.

My consultation includes an intense session with a whip-smart Ayurvedic doctor who, after only five minutes of watching me, seems to know all my food habits and intolerances, along with my genetic and dosha (Ayurvedic energy type) tendencies. After



Ahlyaranga Ayurvedic four-handed massage is offered at Ananda



The restored Viceregal Palace is the historic heart of Ananda

examining my tongue and taking my pulse, he writes detailed notes on his iPad to send to the chef. These are also uploaded into the Ananda Wellness app, which becomes my lifeline during my stay.

I've been prescribed the resort's Stress Management programme, which includes two treatments and three wellness meals per day (as approved by the doctor). I can also take part in any of the complimentary group activities such as hikes, cooking classes, chanting and even Vedanta classes taught by scholars.

I don't have much experience with Ayurveda, so I am excited to embrace a new way of living. Everyone has a wellness orientation to learn about rituals like oil pulling (swishing oil around your mouth), tongue cleaning and *asana* (lubricating the sinuses with medicated drops), as well as nightly foot massages. The wellness food menu is based on Ayurvedic principles, so every meal is light and delicious, although I struggle with the lack of meat. All substitutions and requests must be cleared with the doctor so this can be a little frustrating during meal times, but the staff do their best to get things done efficiently.

The Ayurvedic spa treatments are a major highlight and always include chanting, the use of dosha-specific medicated sesame oil, and two therapists. While the pungent oils and herbs can take some getting used to, I feel like a new person after an *abhyanga* session, in which 1.5 litres of warm oil are poured gently over the forehead to calm the nervous system. Equally nurturing is the *ahlyaranga* oil massage, which sees two therapists massaging my body in perfectly synchronised movements.

It's not just my physical body that gets nourished. My schedule is purposefully kept light so I can enjoy activities like yoga, meditation and singing bowl healing, which work in tandem to quieten my mind. The one-on-one emotional healing session with a visiting therapist leaves me empowered, while an amethyst crystal facial is electrifying.

What takes my stay to a whole new level is the impeccable team. India is renowned for its hospitality, but the staff went out of their way to make my stay more memorable, whether by procuring a specific ghee from the local village or arranging a powerful nine-planet *puja* (prayer) to banish obstacles. I even got a pair of pyjamas to take home. **O**

A GUIDE TO THE DOSHAS

According to Ayurveda, each person has a combination of three fundamental energies, or doshas, that govern the body's physical and mental processes, and need to be kept in balance for optimal well-being.

Vata (air and ether)

Controls movement and bodily processes including the breath, blood flow, muscle contractions and waste elimination. Imbalances can cause anxiety, dry skin, constipation and disturbed sleep.

Pitta (fire and water)

Pitta governs digestion, metabolism, body temperature and hormone production. Imbalances can lead to anger, irritability, inflammation and skin issues.

Kapha (earth and water)

Kapha is the "glue" that holds the body together and provides strength and immunity. Imbalances can cause lethargy, weight gain, congestion, slow digestion and depression.