

Celestria Noel visits a new yoga retreat in India and finds the combination of luxury and simplicity perfectly life-enhancing

NOTHING IS more annoying than being told you look as if you need a holiday, except being told so when you have just come back from one. But, frankly, holidays can leave you feeling pretty dreadful. Too much to drink, too much sun, too much lying around waiting for the next rich meal. You mean to take exercise but the structureless days make motivation vanish, while too much choice means you never even bother to try all the wonderful water-sports on offer or take the tour round the old city. Instead, you lie by the pool, reading a bad book and worrying about the things that await you when you get back. You feel some sympathy with the man you saw shouting into his mobile and wish the island you had chosen for its charming remoteness actually had broadband... Even if your stress levels fall, they will rocket as soon as you get back, when someone kindly suggests you need a break...

Well, there is an alternative. When I returned from a week away this spring, everyone said I looked wonderful. What was more, I felt wonderful. I returned with a new attitude to work and life, calm and serene but energised – and it has lasted. You probably think I went to a sybaritic spa specialising in rejuvenating facials or a health hydro where I lost weight, but you'd be



wrong. Been there, done that... I know that the benefits, however good you feel at the time, do not last.

I went to Shreyas, a recently opened yoga retreat outside Bangalore in India. I had never been to India, never done yoga and positively hate New Age clap-trap, but I knew I needed to do something different, so I packed my bags.

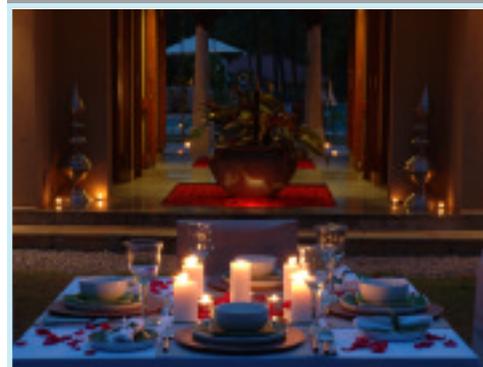
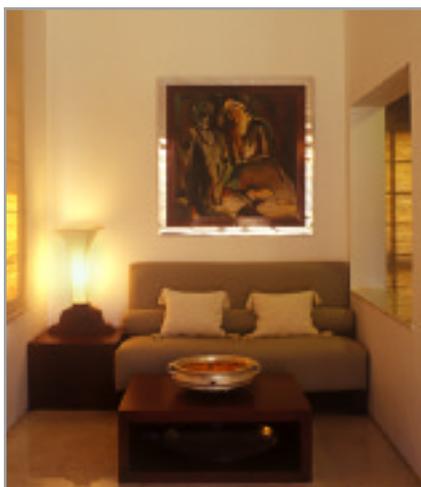
I was a bit nervous of India – heat and dust, flies and beggars and all that – but I need not have worried. On landing in Mumbai, a huge city for which the word teeming might have been invented, I was met and whisked to the splendid Taj Mahal Palace & Tower Hotel. This is all a grand old city hotel should be. It was founded in 1903, and the original tower rooms have recently been restored. It has views over the glittering Arabian sea and the monument known as the Gateway of India, which was

built in 1927 to mark the visit of King George V to India.

The next day, a short flight brought me to Bangalore, a prosperous city that is India's Silicon Valley, with streets shaded by flame trees and which, being high on the Deccan plateau, enjoys a good climate. An hour's drive into the country brings you to villages, farms and market gardens. This is green India. Down a road lined with ancient banyan trees leading to a famous Hindu temple is Shreyas. This 25-acre estate was until recently a coconut plantation but is now the embodiment of a dream realised by a former investment banker, Pawan Malik.

Malik had no previous experience of running hotels. Having discovered yoga himself, he wanted to create a place where people like him, bankers and businessmen, could come and learn yoga in comfortable surroundings. He thinks that nothing quite

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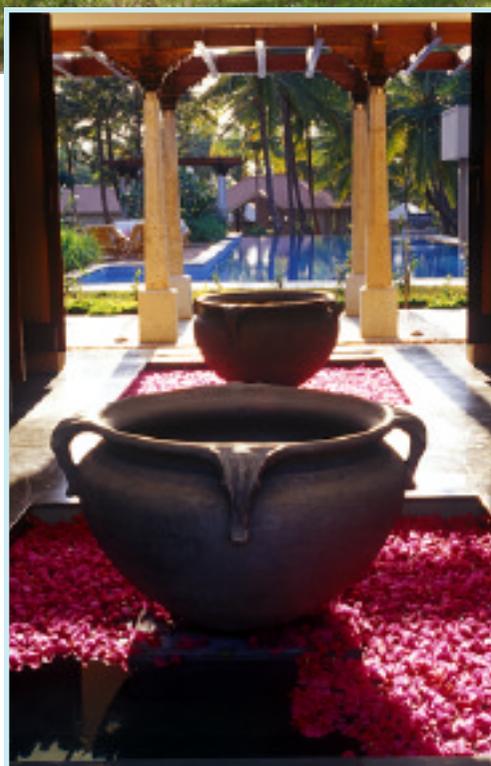
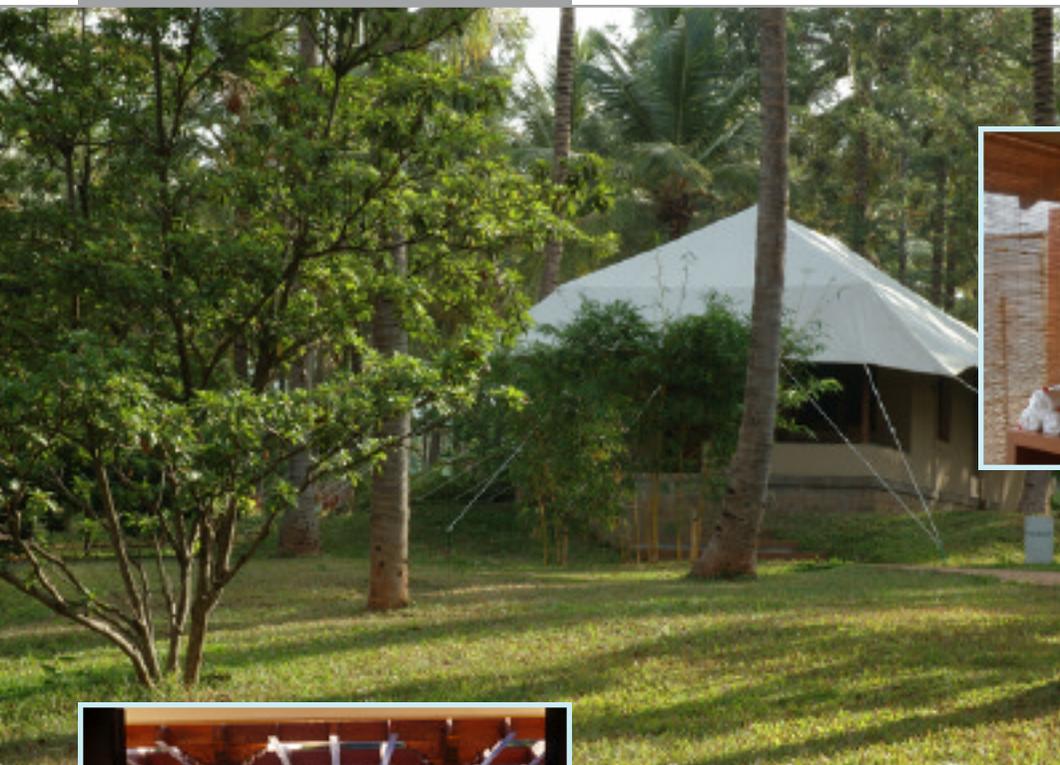


Clockwise from top left Staff practising yoga; the antique pillar entrance to Shreyas; a table set for dinner; the interior of a garden cottage

like Shreyas exists elsewhere, though he, and his wife, who was in charge of the Balinese-inspired design, admit to having been inspired by the style of Aman resorts and to admiring Ananda in the Himalayas (a successful destination spa near Rikikesh). India is full of places you can go and practise yoga but many are quite basic. The world is full of spas, many of which offer yoga classes, but Shreyas is not for pampering. Part of the philosophy is that you should, for instance, help in the gardens or serve food to local schoolchildren – this is yoga karma and is about giving something back. It makes you feel better than non-stop pampering. Massage is available, but there are no beauty therapies. Nor is Shreyas a resort, although there is a nice pool, with a Jacuzzi and steam room, a gym and some cricket nets. It can accommodate 25 in garden cottages or pool rooms, but Malik thinks Shreyas works best

when less full, as tranquility is important (it is not suitable for children).

The food is vegetarian, much of it grown in the 20-acre garden. The five chefs know nothing of short-cuts and portion control, but make meals from scratch. They have backgrounds in diplomatic households and for families, not in hotels. They can cook both Indian and international food, and their celery soup is as good as anything from Gordon Ramsay. The waiters are sweet and want to make you happy but never intrude. All the staff have an elegant dignity combined with friendliness that is most endearing. At lunch, guests sit at a communal table; at dinner, you can eat al fresco at separate tables. There is no choice of menu. Shreyas is the only hotel I have ever stayed where you are offered second helpings. There is no alcohol or smoking, but every day you are offered a new fruit juice invented by the



Clockwise from top right a rejuvenation massage room; a luxurious tent; a view across the retreat

TRAVELFACTS

- www.shreyasretreat.com
- The trip was organised by India specialist Greaves Travel. UK: +44 20 7487 5687. USA: +1 312 279 7333. India: +91 11 2432 3523. www.greavesindia.com.
- Taj Mahal Palace & Tower: www.tajhotels.com

head waiter for breakfast – watermelon with hidden ginger was my favourite.

You are waited on hand and foot by staff who run after you with umbrellas when it rains or when you forget the flip-flops that are provided for every guest and which are all you need by way of shoes – you take shoes off indoors. They will press you to coconut water or lemon-grass tea, which is picked from the garden when you order. Coffee is available but frowned on as ‘rajastic’ or ‘heating’. However, in keeping with the spirit of the place, the staff join you in practising yoga. There is no tipping and no signing endless bits of paper for extras, which also makes it more relaxing.

All this is luxurious, but there is also simplicity. There are no TVs in the simply furnished, canvas-roofed cottages, though there is a broadband connection, so you can plug in your lap-top if you must. There is a screening room where you can watch DVDs after dinner.

On arrival at Shreyas, you are asked about your health and your aims, and a programme is tailored for you which will include three-four hours of yoga, meditation, breathing exercises, talks and massage. Yoga is practised communally in a large open-sided hall at 7.30am and lateness is frowned on. An hour and a half of yoga before breakfast is not everyone’s idea of a holiday, but it is amazing how soon you get into it, even if, like me, you are a beginner. Classes are taken by

Malik or yoga therapist Rucha. Yoga is not supposed to be competitive and many of the ‘asanas’ (poses) are done with your eyes shut. However, it is satisfying to get closer to what others can do as the week goes on. I have always found exercise classes boring, but yoga is far from being mindless, because it works on so many levels. I have found a yoga teacher at home and it has now become a part of my life, unlike any detox programme from a spa holiday or New Year’s gym membership which I have always abandoned after a few weeks – days, even, if I’m honest.

At Shreyas, it is stressed that, although yoga is not just a form of exercise but also a spiritual path, it is not religious. The aim is to learn to understand yourself and make the best of yourself. Malik believes yoga has a message for business leaders and he runs courses at Shreyas designed for them. He says that over the past five years many of the views about leadership from the Eighties and Nineties, which valued loud personalities and sharp intellects, are no longer in vogue – today we need to be ethical, moral and emotionally and spiritually intelligent, as well as technically excellent at our jobs. Yoga is not for wimps; it makes you function better. It certainly helps you cope with stressful situations quite differently.

I noticed when I got home that all the women I told about Shreyas immediately became misty-eyed and said it sounded just perfect, while many of the more traditional men seemed unimpressed by the idea of yoga, not to mention vegetarian food and no booze. Malik says that men often turn to yoga only when they have a problem with their health, but once they overcome their prejudice are amazed at how much better they feel and function. All I can say is wake up, guys, and smell the lemon-grass tea. ■