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LIFESTYLE

When Annick broke up with her loving boyfriend of 20 years, everyone thought she'd gone insane. "I had a big house, a great guy – we were a dream couple," says the 40-year-old creative director and partner of Bahina Jewels, headquartered in Switzerland. But Annick (surname withheld) had made up her mind, and moved out of the home and the relationship. The next few weeks went by in a daze of emotional exhaustion. A friend then recommended a visit to the Shreyas Retreat in faraway India to find inner peace through yoga and meditation. The Bern-based entrepreneur often visits Jaipur and Delhi to buy gems and Pashmina scarves for manufacture and trade. And so on her next trip, two months after her breakup, she checked in at Shreyas, 35 km from Bangalore, for its two-week Ayurvedic Rejuvenation package.

An attractive woman with a ready, generous smile and twinkling eyes, Annick says the trip brought about the 'biggest change' in her life. "It was the perfect way to mark the end of my old life and the beginning a new one. I was able to finally release all those complex emotions," she reminisces. She fasted 'mentally and physically', found solace and healing, and learnt to make meditation a way of life. So convinced was she of the benefits of the experience that she brought her sister Noëlle back with her two years later. "This time, I plan to make yoga a daily practice too, the way I took to meditation in my first trip here," she says.

Annick's experience is not unusual; almost 30 per cent of their guests are repeat visitors, says Balaji Nanabala, CEO of Shreyas Retreat, which goes by the tagline, 'A Journey of Self-Discovery'. Spread across 25 kilometres of lush green, the boutique resort is a member of the exclusive Relais & Chateaux – a collection of 518 fine hotels and gourmet restaurants in 60 countries – and offers world-class luxury amenities and service with all the tranquility and spirituality of an Indian ashram. Three- to 21-day packages are offered – from yoga to culinary to even a silent retreat – priced from USD 1,200 to 9,400 (excluding taxes). Though facilities include a pool, steam bath, Jacuzzi, a large home-theatre with hundreds of DVDs, and a spa, the retreat prides itself foremost for its yoga. Almost every package includes group and individual training sessions in all forms – from Hatha and Ashtanga asanas to kriyas, pranayama, Vedic chants and yoga nidra – along with consultations with the in-house Ayurvedic doctor and naturopath.

Rooms are tastefully done up, the tents designed to allow natural sounds through even with air-conditioning inside. Bathrooms open up to a private pebbled floor backyard with your very own tree or two. Attached verandahs offer placid views of swaying palm trees, rows of flower bushes and a grazing calf if you are lucky. Rooms come equipped with WiFi for those unfortunate enough to have to work while here, and the pool is literally at your doorstep (of those in the poolside cottages). A three-kilometre walk around the property could also include a detour to the organic farm where most of your food is grown. The cuisine here is exclusively vegetarian and the retreat has a no-alcohol and no-smoking policy. Even so, meals are so delicious and wholesome that guests – almost all foreigners – swear they don't miss non-vegetarian fare at all.

With a task force of 65 persons, the resort offers just 14 rooms that can accommodate a maximum of 25 guests. A guest to staff ratio like that ensures quality service besides attention to detail that defies expectation. So, for instance, you may find your lunch table set up with fresh flowers – different ones at every meal, maybe a green twine tying up your napkin. On one night you may chance upon colourful lanterns on a tree outside your window; on another, your dinner table would have been set up along the pool, with candles and roses. Those on a 'silent retreat' communicate with the staff using gestures, notepads and smiles. Buddha heads and books on self-improvement can be found all over the place, as can mosquito-repellent cream and cushions (for those unused to sitting in lotus pose for too long) next to your yoga mat. Your bedside table even has earplugs in case the sound of a distant train going by is too much for you.

It is evident that the staff take the value of Atithi Devo Bhava (Guest is God) very seriously – all employees are required to do daily yoga and chants (the cooks pray before preparing meals too) – and the resort has invested much in CSR, including the construction of a new building for a local orphanage and rainwater harvesting in nearby farms.

With all those positive vibes, it is not surprising that guests like Annick leave feeling healthier and happier even after short stays. A noticeable lightness of being settles in your spirit, a feeling of oneness with nature. To categorise Shreyas as a hotel is inadequate; this is a space for self-love and making peace with the universe.



From top 1. Shreyas resort 2. The spa offers Ayurvedic therapies and a variety of massages 3. The interiors of the three-room garden cottage 4. The resort serves flavourful, fresh vegetarian food 5. Yoga session at the Kaveri Vanita Sevashrama, an orphanage supported by Shreyas Retreat