



a passage to india

Evidence of India's timeless healing traditions can be found on spa menus around the world, but there's no better way to enjoy them than at the source. Here's how to plan an unforgettable trip to this magnificent land where the real journey of mind, body and soul begins.

BY ERIC HISS

BANGALORE'S COUNTRY ESCAPE: Shreyas Retreat

Spanning 25 acres in the lush countryside of Bangalore, this intimate property of just 12 refined cottages has a staff-to-guest ratio of 4-to-1. Healthful teas appear almost as if by magic and practices like yoga, meditation and chanting are the very core of the experience. Hundreds of palm trees dot the property where classes ranging from open-air yoga to Indian cooking are open to students of every level and included in your stay. Cottage interiors are Zenlike, uncluttered spaces featuring Asian-influenced furnishings and bathrooms stocked with local organic body products. Outside, private gardens with open-air showers and fruiting banana plants await.

For such an intimate retreat, Shreyas features an impressive array of treatments and three-day to three-week packages focusing on interests such as weight management, yoga and ayurvedic rejuvenation. Sign up for the latter and you'll experience true ayurvedic massages given by qualified ayurvedic therapists. The experience can also include dietary recommendations and meals cooked specifically for your dosha, offered at no extra charge. But be advised: Shreyas is the only Relais & Chateaux property that doesn't serve alcohol or meat. That said, its amazing cuisine, crafted from organic vegetables, fruits and herbs grown on-site, is a consistent delight.

TRAVEL TIP: Arrange an excursion to Mysore, home to the Palace of Mysore, one of the largest in India. It's never more impressive than on Sunday evenings when the facade is illuminated with thousands of tiny white lights.

RATES: Rooms from \$470; three-night, all-inclusive packages from \$1,770, shreyasretreat.com

GETTING THERE: Shreyas is a one-hour drive from Bangalore's International Airport.

HIMALAYAN SERENITY: Ananda

Tucked in the foothills of the majestic Himalayas near the holy cities of Rishikesh and Haridwar, it's hard not to be seduced by Ananda's natural setting, which includes stellar views of the Ganges River and a verdant tree-studded landscape. The hotel itself boasts 75 rooms centered around the main building, the former palace of a local maharajah. Contemporary rooms feature appreciated amenities such as balconies or private gardens, a pillow menu and soft cotton pajamas for guests to wear throughout their stay.

Walk down a serene pathway away from the graceful white columns and balustrades of the hotel and you arrive at the spa. Here, your yoga practice takes place in an open-air pavilion with marble floors and an ornately stenciled gold-leaf roof. Spa treatments can include anything from a traditional ayurvedic therapy to more modern offerings including hydro-body exfoliations or the customized massage.

Everything at Ananda is about customization; even the type of ayurveda practiced here is adjusted to the higher altitude and cooler temperatures of the region, utilizing less oil and slower, synchronized massage techniques. The experience continues at the Restaurant, where cuisine adheres to ayurvedic principles and is served to go with your diagnosed dosha type. The goal: to ensure the meals you eat are more than just delicious but also sustain the balance you are cultivating during treatments and activities. The resort is also known for its beauty treatments, which include facials, skin care, body wraps and aromatherapy. In a departure from most of India's destination spas, you'll also find Western-style spa amenities here, including state-of-the-art hydrotherapy facilities, an outdoor temperature-controlled lap pool, a sauna, steam rooms and a fully equipped gym.

The Basics: Ayurveda and Yoga

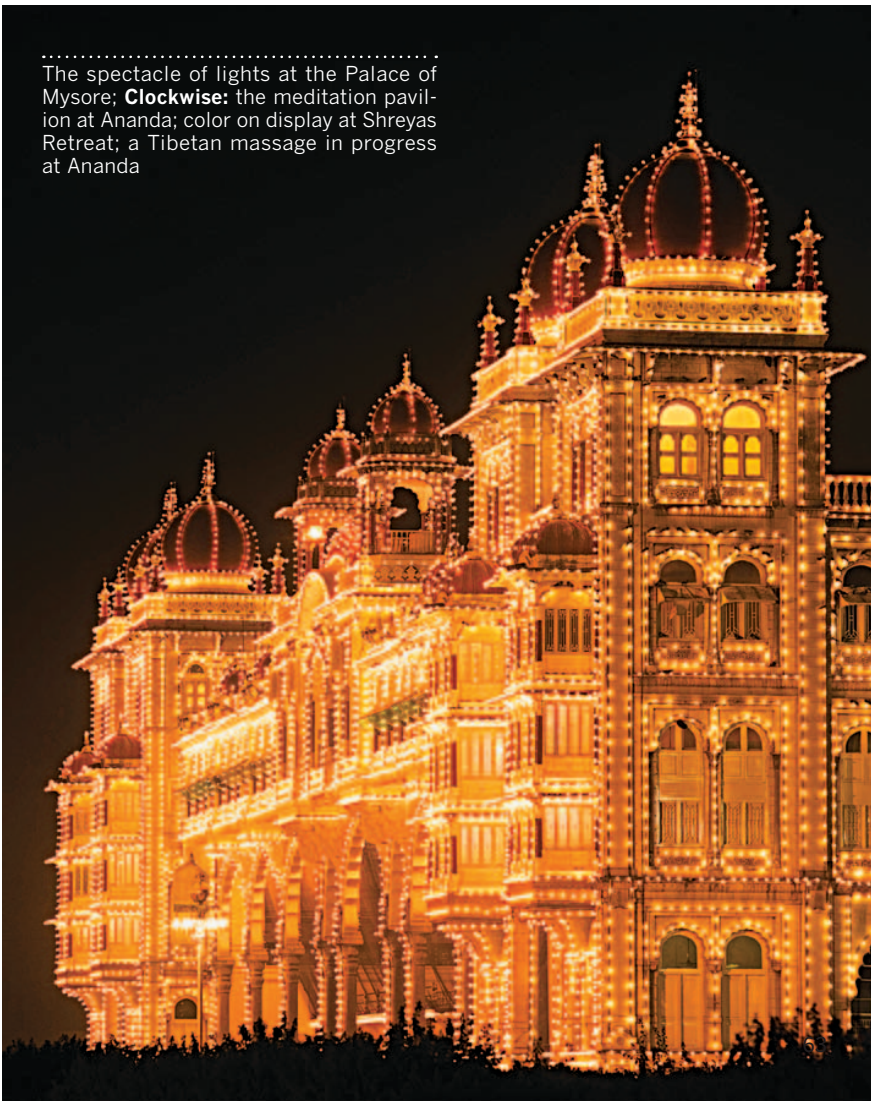
You can't discuss Indian healing traditions without beginning with ayurveda. The practice goes back some 5,000 years to the ancient Vedic era, when it was first developed in South India. Ayurveda, which means "life knowledge" in Sanskrit, values balance, seeking harmony between the mind, body and spirit. Belief holds that both the universe and our bodies are comprised of five eternal elements: earth, fire, water, air and ether. These elements combine in pairs to form three distinct doshas present in all of us: vata (ether and air), pitta (fire and water) and kapha (earth and water). Every person possesses all three in varying degrees,

with one or two usually predominating; when they aren't in equilibrium, overall health is affected. In ayurveda, a practitioner seeks to ensure a patient's doshas are all optimally aligned through treatments, a prescribed diet and practices such as yoga and meditation.

Another foundation of Indian wellness, and by far the best-known, is yoga. This system of devotion, meditation and physical postures is believed to have developed in the Indus Valley Civilization in northwestern India around 5,000 years ago and has been developed over the centuries by generations of sages and

teachers. The word yoga itself comes from an ancient Sanskrit root meaning to yoke or join. That's exactly what the practice seeks to do, unifying the mind, body and spirit through physical discipline that stills the mind and opens us to spiritual awareness.

Today, yoga has many branches, but the best known in the West is Hatha Yoga. Many variations of classic Hatha Yoga are popular today, including power yoga, a vigorous style that adheres to a constant sequence of movements; Kundalini, a more esoteric style relying on held postures and breath work; and Bikram yoga, a "hot" style that imposes external heat to increase flexibility.



The spectacle of lights at the Palace of Mysore; **Clockwise:** the meditation pavilion at Ananda; color on display at Shreyas Retreat; a Tibetan massage in progress at Ananda