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Practice makes perfect in India

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Tabitha May discovers the true meaning of yoga at Shreyas, a new luxury resort near Bangalore.

Yoga holidays can generally be divided into two categories. Either you suffer a spiritual fast track at a pretty basic venue, inveigled to perform hours of hard labour aka "karma yoga"; or, you settle into a glamorous five-star pleasure dome which provides a more etiolated spiritual experience.

Shreyas, in southern India, however, is a bit different. It offers a unique opportunity to tailor-make your own yoga holiday in the most sumptuous of settings but without having to forgo any spiritual Brownie points. In fact, you could say that unifying the spiritual and the corporeal is exactly what yoga – which means "union" in Sanskrit – is all about.

Getting to Shreyas has been made easier by British Airways' new direct route to Bangalore. Most of us know Bangalore as the location of those irksome call centres but it's also a spiritual hotspot, being close to Mysore, the home of Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga, and the huge Sai Baba community at Puttapathi.

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After travelling for 90 minutes from the airport by car, I breathed a sigh of relief as we passed through a pair of elegant wooden gates. Each gently arching palm tree ushering me up the drive had been lovingly planted in perfect symmetry. The main house, when we reached it, was a cool labyrinth of spacious luxury: sunken marble floors supported generous urns filled with water and rose petals; deep sofas, garlanded Buddha statues, and groaning bookshelves met my jet-lagged gaze.

The infinity pool sparkled in the sunlight and the yoga pavilion beyond beckoned. First, though, a beautiful man in white placed a lei of tuberoses around my neck and handed me a delicate fresh juice 'mocktail'. Next, I was taken on a tour of the organic vegetable farm,

the steam rooms, the spa, the gym and the cinema furnished with inviting leather chairs.

Finally, once settled into my smart tented accom-modation, comprising four solid walls, canopied roof, a private Zen garden and ultrachic bathroom, I went in search of the yoga classes.

Classes at Shreyas take place twice daily in an open-air pavilion set among palm fronds and tropical flowers. Participants are divided into beginners and advanced (around 70 to 80 per cent of guests at Shreyas are beginners) and one of the many magical things about Shreyas is that staff join the morning classes so you're likely to be sharing your practice with waiters, dishwashers, massage therapists and the hotel's farm workers.

Though I'm used to attending classes with "big-name" and often rather pleased-with-themselves teachers in ersatz spiritualised settings, I soon realised there was nothing better than this no-nonsense, gimmick-free yoga, done in warm, muscle-relaxing temperatures, taught by a native yoga teacher and surrounded by people who practise as a way of life rather than because it's the fashionable thing to do.

There's nothing like the virtue of doing a yoga class to stimulate an appetite. We sat for three-course breakfasts and lunches round a wide dining table, humbled into hushed whispers by the care taken over the preparation and serving of our food, much of which had been grown in the Shreyas farm. By night, we ate in the balmy outdoors, framed by the multicoloured glow of candles and lanterns.

Before visiting Shreyas, I had been worried about the "community-based activities" in which I would be invited to participate. What if I decided to lie by the pool instead? I imagined being judged by pious staff as I worked on my tan. But I soon realised I had misunderstood what Shreyas was all about. The staff were easy going about whether guests participated or not.

And so it was that after a few days of Balinese massages and yoga, I went, of my own free will, to the farm where I was shown how to plant green bean seeds and okra. I enjoyed it too – city girl that I am, I was uncharacteristically unafraid of messing up my manicure, it wasn't hard work, it didn't last long and I learnt a lot. Not about farming techniques – who am I kidding? – but about higher pursuits - yoga, inter-dependence and cause and effect. After

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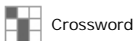
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my day on my farm, I was invited to spend a few hours doing another community-based activity. This entailed returning to the garden, picking some vegetables, preparing them for cooking and then going to a local school and dishing them out.

Some in our group chose to work on their tans by the pool and that was fine. But three of us ventured to the nearby village infants' school. Apparently, our few simple vegetarian dishes, served on a banana leaf, represented a rare feast for the children. Nevertheless, they sat patiently, eyes and huge shining, until they were all served before hungrily tucking in.

I was so grateful I had opted to go to the school rather than hanging out at Shreyas. For all the opulence of the resort, and the undoubted pleasure of indulging in a week's total luxury, it is that day with the children that has turned out to be my lasting memory of the week.

I think it's this substance amid style that is one of the keys to the success of Shreyas. If you wanted nothing else you could have a relaxing five-star break, lying by the glittery pool, being massaged and fed into insouciance. You could also begin or augment a knowledge of yoga postures with excellent teachers and reap the inevitable benefits. Or, if you felt like it – and only if you felt like it – you could explore Yoga with a capital "Y", helping others, finding out about equanimity, cause, effect – and jolly good karma.

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