



Sri Ramanasramam is a hermetically sealed world of peaceful elegant simplicity, where ancient sadhus clad in orange waddle silently along the raked sand walkways, and milk-white peacocks fan their tails on the temple roof.

I was there to practise jnana yoga, the most challenging of all yogas. Sri Ramana Maharshi, the guru in whose honour the ashram was built, believed that repetition of the question 'Who am I?' destroys all other thoughts, leaving behind only sat-chit-ananda-existence-consciousness bliss.

I began my quest at 0600 with the morning milk offering to the Maharshi. A bare-chested swami bearing armfuls of orange, pink and white garlands conducted a prayer ceremony, scattering leaves and petals as he chanted, filling the air with a heady mixture of flowers, citronella and incense. Breakfast was eaten off a banana leaf, which I was told to sprinkle first with water – I wasn't sure if this was devotional or hygienic but I gave it a good dousing. A pot-bellied sadhu with a huge tin bucket turned the leaf dirty side up, threw the contents of his ladle upon it and beamed. I beamed back, practising non-attachment to cleanliness. I spent the rest of the day exploring Arunachala, the hill that the Maharshi called his

'guru', where I found his cave, and the little house that he lived in for many years before the ashram was built. The Maharshi would lie for hours in silence, surrounded by every form of life – from Jackie the dog who would sit on an orange cloth and stare at him, to Lakshmi the cow, which he believed to be an incarnation of the old lady who used to feed him when he lived in the cave.

Cave and house were both full so I retired to the ashram's own meditation hall. I settled down and soon I was sinking deep into the infinite blackness. I sat listening to my breath – deep and steady – with nothing to worry about. In that weightlessness I found stillness, an awareness of a bigger reality; pure existence, consciousness, and yes, bliss.

I don't know how much time passed before the cleaning lady's sudden entry awoke me. Had I experienced jnana yoga? Who cared? For the first time in the yoga schools of India, I had felt the potential of a merger with cosmic bliss. For this miracle I award it the title of Ashram of the Year and highly recommend you give it a try.

Lucy Edge, author of Yoga School Dropout (Ebury)

COASTAL RETREAT

The Dune



Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu

T+91 (0)41-3265 5751

www.thedune.in

From US\$75 per room per night

A funky eco-hotel set on a lovely stretch of beach on the Coromandel coast in southern India, The Dune offers daily yoga, reflexology and ayurvedic massage, organic food and optional detox programmes. There are bicycles to borrow, plus a swimming pool and tennis court, or just walk on the beach where sadhus have come for centuries from the nearby temples to meditate.

Organic meals, often using raw food, are based on a 'hypotoxic' (or toxin-free) diet plan devised by a French biologist, Dr Jean Seignale. Bedrooms are colourful, clean and peaceful, and the public spaces are often hung with some inspirational artwork (the hotel is a base for an artists-in-residence programme).

The Dune is just 15 km from Pondicherry, one of India's more peaceful towns, which still retains some of its elegant French buildings and charm (it was a French colony until 1954). Fly to Chennai, from where the Dune is just over a two-hour drive; pick ups can be arranged. After your stay, head to the hills and the **Elephant Valley** (www.elephantvalley.com), The Dune's sister retreat, a 40-ha organic farm 20 km from Tamil Nadu's hill station Kodaikanal, and a great base for trekking, horse-riding or just chilling out.

The Dune is also a short 10-km drive from **Auroville** (www.miraura.org), the experimental international community set up in 1968 by Frenchwoman Mirra Alfassa (known as 'The Mother'), where a group of people from various countries has been living for nearly 40 years. After obtaining a guest pass, visitors can explore the complex and participate in activities open to Aurovilians, which include all sorts of things from Indian dance to ashtanga yoga. There's also a Quiet Healing Centre on the nearby beach, well known for its underwater body treatments.

The hydrotherapy treatment tank is a little public so it's best to stick to the ayurvedic massages, which are good.

YOGA RETREAT

Shreyas



Bangalore, Karnataka

T+91 (0)80-2773 7183

www.shreyasretreat.com

From US\$296 per night, double occupancy

Set in 10 ha of landscaped grounds on the outskirts of Bangalore, Shreyas is an ideal place to come if you want to experience peace and yoga in five-star luxury.

Various hatha yoga lessons by Indian teachers run (usually) twice daily, though those already into yoga may not find these challenging. The staff often join in, adding to the community spirit. The yoga studio floor is tiled, which is a little unforgiving, but the open-sided building allows for lots of fresh air and the architecture is calming.

There are daily silent meditation sessions,

when everyone can benefit from quiet, and a wellness consultant, trained in Vedanta philosophy, is available for advice. An occasional Spiritual Awakening retreat includes yoga, life coaching and meditation, and hosts several high-profile Indian guest speakers. But Shreyas is also about pampering: Balinese massage and exotic fruit body scrubs are invigorating extras along with the steam room, jacuzzi and pool.

Though the main buildings are plain, the de luxe stone cottages are impressive with canvas ceilings and private patios. Internal decor is neutral with beige and white sheets, a small desk, telephone and internet connection. Tall palm trees and superbly maintained gardens surround the rooms.

One of the most appealing features is the organic garden, where aromatic herbs and vegetables are grown. The vegetarian cuisine is exceptional, and is enhanced by the silver service and tables festooned with flower petals. Alcohol is not allowed on the premises. There's a gym, library, home theatre with DVD selection, and outdoor amphitheatre where music recitals are sometimes held.

Expect to meet mainly single women, some couples and a few Indian business travellers. It can feel empty when there are no retreats running. Though accessed by a picturesque road lined with ancient trees, Shreyas is very near a train line, which can be noisy. November to January are the best months to visit. Six-night packages cost from US\$2000 and include accommodation, meals, yoga classes, five rejuvenation massages, interactive philosophy sessions and airport transfers. Fly to Bangalore, from where it's a 50-km drive.



Top: The tiled yoga studio at Shreyas. **Above:** The landscaped grounds at Shreyas make for a peaceful and attractive setting.

HEALTH & FITNESS RETREAT

Soukya International Holistic Health Centre



Bangalore, Karnataka
T+91 (0)80-2531 8405
www.soukya.com
From US\$135 per person per night

East and West unite at Soukya, a tranquil, friendly healing centre in 12 ha of beautifully cultivated countryside east of Bangalore. The centre offers a range of highly personalized programmes – ranging from seven to 28 days – and promotes wellness; not just being free from illness, but living life fully in mind, body and spirit. Come here to relax and

rejuvenate, or work more deeply on a psychological or physical level.

Individual cottages are situated around lawns, flowers and trees and house 12 en suite single and double rooms, and four suites richly decorated with silk-draped four-poster beds. You have your own private garden, and there are plenty of places to find