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Relax and breathe easy, at full stretch
Treat body and soul to a healing getaway, with a chance for some self-
discovery
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I am neither indoors nor outdoors. A sweet, smoky fragrance wafts all around. The palm trees are swaying. Upside down. No, I'm not at a rave. I'm in an open-air yoga pavilion at a yoga retreat. The perfume is burning incense. It's only 7:30am, but the sun is high in the sky and I'm standing with my head between my knees in *utthita janu sirsasana*. And even though my body is contorted, I'm in heaven.

My plan to escape, alone, to this luxury yoga retreat was met with all-round astonishment from my family. After all, my life is perfect: I don't have the burden of a full-time job, or have to go to school like my kids, or even have homework. Why would I possibly want to escape?

Well, for the same reasons anyone else with a full-time job and high levels of work-related stress might. To take stock of my life. For introspection. To learn yoga and meditation, to rejuvenate mind and body, perhaps also, just to run away briefly from the big city. And the Shreyas Retreat near Bangalore, I'd heard, is a good place to do that.

A car and driver from Shreyas were waiting for me at Bangalore airport. It was springtime. The pale pink blooms adorning the enormous rain trees, the laburnums beset with golden-yellow flowers and the frothy lilac blossoms of the jacarandas all complemented each other. The stunning flora kept my eyes skywards, which was a good thing because Bangalore's roads were grimy and potholed, the buildings ugly and decrepit.

Ninety minutes of traffic, dusty countryside and ramshackle construction later, we arrived at the nondescript village of Nelamangala. Soon, we drove into a gated compound. Swaying coconut palms, green lawns, thickets of bamboo and frangipani surrounded white, tented cottages. The architecture was Balinese-inspired. Clean lines, no clutter and

an impossibly calm, blue infinity pool created a serene setting. Bougainvilleas and ginger flowers added splashes of colour.

Shreyas takes its *atithi devo bhava* (treat a guest like God) tagline very seriously. I was greeted with a smile, the traditional namaste, a fresh flower garland and cold towel. Now, I'm not hot on cold towels, mainly because they usually have a fake floral smell. But this one had the wonderful aroma of eucalyptus and camphor, and made me feel cosseted and cared for, even before I entered the retreat. Thankfully, there was no check-in counter; just a seat in the library, a short form quickly filled and a smiling man ready to show me my room. I had a choice. The pool cottage was a tad larger and more luxurious looking, but the garden cottage had a large indoor-outdoor bathroom. My mind was made up; the garden cottage would be quieter. After all, I had escaped and was in need of quiet. My worries, it turned out, were unfounded since there were only four other guests.

My cottage was simply, but tastefully, decorated in creams and browns. Everything I needed was there: Firm bed, soft pillows, wardrobe, kettle for herbal tea, books on philosophy and a desk with broadband connection. The shower in the spacious bathroom pounded out hot water and overlooked a small, well-tended garden with frangipani and birds of paradise in bloom.

All the information I required about Shreyas was at hand: How to get my laptop plugged in, timings for various yoga, chanting and meditation sessions, and a brochure on Shreyas. Service was impeccable without being obsequious. Everything that I required was taken care of quickly and efficiently. A staff of 75 looks after only 25 guests at full capacity, creating a luxurious service ratio.

After a wellness consultation that afternoon with the resident doctor, a programme was tailored for me. A 7:30am yoga session, followed by breakfast, an organic gardening session, then chanting, and lunch at one. Free time in the afternoon, followed by another yoga session, a massage, and dinner at eight. I realized I wasn't going to have much time for lounging around in the hot tub or reading the six books I'd brought, not to mention using the watercolours and laptop. To be fair, none of the sessions were obligatory, but I felt the need to try everything to get the best out of my stay. Who knew running away would be such hard work?

The yoga was gruelling. Every muscle stretched and twisted for the first time in 25 years. The Balinese deep tissue massage could not have come at a more opportune moment.

Finally, a quick shower and a candlelit dinner under a canopy of stars. Each night the table was set with fresh flowers and candles and placed in different parts of the property. The cool night breeze ruffled the foliage of the *raat ki rani* bushes and we were surrounded by their imperceptible, yet intoxicating, fragrance. Guests could choose to eat together on a large dining table, or alone. The healthy, beautifully presented vegetarian food was cooked with produce organically grown on the property.

On day two, I met the owner: Pawan Malik, an investment banker-turned-yogi. The meditation session with him was energizing, the chat thought-provoking: “If you can watch your breath and thoughts, then it follows that you are not your breath, neither are you your thoughts. Then who are you?”

To generate the right atmosphere for this kind of yogic learning, the norm is vegetarian meals, no smoking and no alcohol. This doesn't go down well with all guests. But then Shreyas attracts a special kind of guest— one who is committed to giving yoga a chance to prove its life-changing potential. And if this means giving up meat, alcohol and smoking for just a few days, so be it. The idea is to become intoxicated with life.

So, where's the luxury? It's not ostentatious and in-your-face. It's a quiet kind of luxury. Attention to detail in everything, whether it's gourmet food, peaceful rooms, well-structured yoga lessons or incredibly relaxing massages. And the most important luxury—the time you eke out for yourself.

I returned to real life with batteries fully charged and with a set of skills to stand me in good stead for the daily knocking about that one endures. Running away is now definitely on my annual list of things to do.

Write to lounge@livemint.com

Shreyas Retreat prices: Rs12,300 for single, Rs14,760 for double; six-night comprehensive wellness package Rs1,24,500 for single, Rs1,86,700 for double (Tel: (080) 2773 7102 and 98450 45250); www.shreyasretreat.com