



A journey of self-discovery

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Wellbeing

Oops upside your head

If you really want to achieve inner calm, stop talking. **Michael Booth** finds silence is golden at a luxury ashram in India

HOW ARE YOU SUPPOSED to react when your wife announces that she is sending you away on a six-day silent retreat in the Indian countryside? Call Carter Ruck? Fret about the quality of your pillow talk?

I chose to see it for what it was: genuine concern for my stress levels and faith that the Shreyas yoga retreat team would gently guide me through a week of isolated, calm reflection – they call it Mouna, Sanskrit for ‘silence’ – to soothe away the tensions of my working life.

On arrival I am asked to fill in a questionnaire detailing my physical and mental state and whether I am sure that I want to enter into self-imposed silence. ‘It is not for everyone,’ the head of research, Krishna Prakash, tells me. ‘If you are in a state of transition, between relationships or jobs for instance, we don’t recommend silence, at least not for the first couple of days.’ Yes, I am sure, I say, inwardly beginning to doubt. ‘This gives you a space to be with yourself, to go deep within,’ says Krishna who in common with the other Shreyas staff has a background in yoga instruction rather than the hotel trade. ‘When you are silent, sleeping demons may come but you will learn that being alone need not mean being lonely.’

Am I ready to turn my focus within? How will I cope with my sleeping demons? Am I allowed to sing in the shower? No to the latter, apparently. Mouna is all about conserving the energy wasted through unnecessary vocalisation. Careless talk costs drive. I am given a notepad and pen with which to communicate.

As it turns out, silence truly is golden. During my six days at Shreyas I experience something approaching bliss. Not talking turns out to be my default setting. As I recline on my veranda, listening to the occasional coconut thud from the trees and watching the parakeets methodically

Photo: David Laundy/Photo.com

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Wellbeing

➤ inspecting the chikoo fruits for ripeness on a nearby bush, the mental fog begins to dissipate and I achieve a state of calm clarity that would be unthinkable in my everyday life.

That's not to say I remain idle. Each day brings a strict schedule of twice daily, deceptively tough hatha yoga sessions (the first at 7am), followed by group sound mediation (slightly self-conscious mantra chanting, either out loud or in your head) and walking meditation, strolling around the grounds pondering the day's philosophical question. Various forms of massage, wellness and beauty treatments are on offer, and the instructors introduce me to other meditative techniques such as *pranayama* (which focuses on breathing) and *trataka*, in which you stare intently at a candle flame. I am an instant convert to *yoga nidra*, also known as psychic sleep, because you do it lying down with your eyes closed, and you enter a 'hypnagogic' state, undulating enjoyably in and out of consciousness. It's like a psychic rollercoaster.

During my 'rest periods' I read some of the daunting novels I've been meaning to tackle for ages, as well as books on yoga and meditation. In one, I come across this quote from Marcus Aurelius, and nod sagely in agreement: 'Men seek retreat in houses in the country, at the seashore, in the mountains but it is in our power whenever we choose to retreat into ourselves... tranquillity is nothing other than the proper ordering of the mind.' I mentally order my life back home, pledging to cut out the dead wood of futile habits and indulgences. Sometimes on my veranda, I just sit and stare, just because I can. Guests are encouraged to keep a spiritual journal, noting down their philosophical musings en route to *samadhi* (the final, super-conscious, eighth level of Raja Yoga) but my mind drifts often to daydreams inspired by my 'man-in-the-iron-mask' isolation. I am a movie star hiding out from paparazzi, a supergrass on witness protection, a spy recuperating from a near-fatal mission, and a diamond thief lying low.

Founded by London-based Indian banker Pawan Malik, Shreyas bills itself as a luxury ashram, a place where a maximum of 25 guests can focus on perfecting their mind-body-spirit balance. Many are single women (a number of whom, I would hazard, have a copy of *Eat, Pray, Love* in their luggage), for whom this is a particularly safe, unthreatening environment. Unlike the *vipassana* silent retreats offered by other ashrams – with their spartan dorm accommodation and regimented programmes starting at 3am – guests here are at liberty to pick and choose which activities they wish to try, or spend the time prone by the pool working their way through the resort's library.

For Mouna guests, who stay in the more secluded



Guests at Shreyas yoga resort near Bangalore can spend their time taking yoga classes and other wellness treatments, or simply relax by the pool with a good book

garden-view cottages, meals are taken alone on their verandahs, which suited me fine since it always heightened the sense of anticipation for the moment when a member of staff would appear around the corner bearing my tray of soup, salad, *dal*, rice, rotis and a vegetable dish, with perhaps some fresh fruit for dessert.

The least successful element of my programme was the session in the organic kitchen garden. It wasn't the work of weeding, planting and pruning that I objected to, nor the midday heat, more the audience of staff and gardeners who stood watching my every move as I made my slow progress up the vegetable patch. It felt a little fake. More rewarding and 'authentic' was a 'community service' trip on a tractor to a local primary school, where I helped prepare and serve lunch for 60 charming and inquisitive local children.

Shreyas can be reached with a 10-hour flight to Bangalore and an hour's drive, so a short break is possible; but if you are hoping for an authentically Indian experience, this is probably not it. Shreyas is Sanskrit for 'total excellence' and, as you might imagine, the chaotic cacophony of contemporary India intrudes only peripherally into its idyllic, 25-acre, palm-filled gardens, in the form of temple music wafting on the warm breeze.

The facilities and service are of Western-style, five-star standard; and the architecture is in a deliberately neutral, 'international minimalist' style. The tented roofs of the cottages do lend the resort some character though; they all have bathrooms which open on to a walled pebble garden; and the monsoon which arrived on my last night brought the cosy drumming of rain on canvas.

I can understand why many of the guests at Shreyas (of whom Brits make up the majority) never see anything else of India, but it's a shame. I used it as a kind of decompression chamber following a three-month circumnavigation of India researching my next book, for which purpose it worked a treat. The real world came as quite a shock, although, at least when someone sneezed, I could at last say, 'Bless you.'

Shreyas (00 91 98451 40958; www.shreyasretreat.com; in the UK contact MAhout Ltd on 020 7373 7121). The seven-night Mouna Retreat costs £1,640 per person (single occupancy) full board, or £1,170 per person based on two sharing. Cottages from £250 per night for two sharing. Greaves Travel offers a week's stay at Shreyas from £1,840 per person (based on two sharing), including BA flights, full-board accommodation, sightseeing in Bangalore, transfers and yoga treatments