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India's hotel with a heart

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Guests at a yoga retreat in Bengaluru were so moved by the children from a local orphanage that they clubbed together to build them a new home

By Mike Peake, *Friday* magazine
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Image Credit: Supplied picture

The orphanage and old-age home houses 40 children and 20 elderly people.

When a new hotel springs up next door, it's not normally something for curtain-twitching locals to rush out and celebrate. There are usually worries about noise or an increase in traffic. Maybe the rooms on the top floor will be looking straight into nearby homeowners' kitchens. But if there's one kind of hotel that's rather more likely to see the community hang out the bunting it's the Shreyas yoga retreat. This is a place that's not geared towards wild parties and late nights. There won't even be a TV to throw out of the bedroom window.

In fact, when a yoga retreat is built next door, it might just be time to knock down the garden fence and invest in a new welcome mat, because good things can happen there. Shreyas, which opened in 2004, is a luxurious 25-acre retreat on the outskirts of Bengaluru, India. Almost from the start, the owners saw the importance of getting involved with their neighbours.

The notion that they should be a self-contained hideaway just for holidaymakers seemed at odds with their overall philosophy. It was a decision that led to the creation of a new \$200,000 (Dh734,600) orphanage. As ethical retreats go, Shreyas is in a class of its own. Forget holidays that are supposedly good for the environment, here's a vacation where you might just change someone's life.

"We wanted the locals to know that our goal was to be a real part of their community," says Pawan Malik, owner of Shreyas. "In one respect, yoga is about service. You're helping yourself by helping others, and we thought it would be a good idea for our guests to meet and mingle with the locals."

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The start of something special

In December 2007 a guest from the UK made a special request to visit an orphanage during her stay at Shreyas. A visit to an orphanage called Kaveri Vanitha Seveshrama (KVS) in the neighbouring village of Hesaraghatta was arranged – and it turned out to be the start of something special. Housed in an old, dilapidated building with a dangerous asbestos sheet roof, KVS catered to 20 orphaned children as well as a number of disadvantaged elderly women. It wasn't exactly the Hilton, but it had a heart and Shreyas staff and guests connected with it immediately.

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Sarojamma, a 60-year-old woman who was running KVS, was a particular inspiration. She ran the orphanage with love and dedication and seemed to bring out the best in everyone. After witnessing her devotion, the Shreyas guests and staff instantly wanted to help, so they donated mattresses, pillows and money to the orphanage. Strange as it sounds, a visit to the orphanage soon became a top attraction for anyone staying at Shreyas.

Guests found it uplifting. As Pawan explains, the orphans and elderly women weren't living a miserable existence – far from it. They were inspiring. "We didn't take our guests to the orphanage just so they could see how sad it was," he says. "We took them to see how people live and survive even when, from our perspective, they seem to have very little. "We would

get immense joy from being around them and helping them with whatever we could, whether it was with school books or toilet repairs.” And so things started to snowball.

“What we were trying to do was very small,” says Pawan. “We found that many of our guests were moved by that. We weren’t trying to change the world, but little by little we were hoping to promote some discipline in terms of sanitation, cleanliness, food and access to medicine for the children. “Guests were very keen to help and we offered to be the catalyst. If someone wanted to donate something – maybe they had some clothes or books to give away – we would collect the donations and give them to the kids.”

When a local villager left some land to Sarojamma, Shreyas offered to help build a new, purpose-built orphanage on the site. Initially it seemed something of a pipe dream because of how much a new building was likely to cost, but they began raising money regardless. “It started very small,” says Pawan. “We put some money in, guests put some money in and then local villagers offered things like wood, cement and their expertise.”

Soon bigger donations from Shreyas guests bolstered the kitty. One donated £5,000 (Dh28,850) then organised a reunion with other Shreyas guests in London where another guest gave £2,000. “The idea was to create a building over multiple floors with a little school room and space for the children and old ladies to be able to live separately with their specific needs catered to,” says Pawan.

From dream to reality

In December 2011 the orphanage opened in a shiny new three-floor building. The children were in awe. Here was somewhere they could live in comfort. There were places to have fun and there was even a library with computers. Work had cost around \$200,000 from start to finish, with most of the money coming from Shreyas guests. Bearing in mind that the yoga retreat is hardly huge – there are just 14 rooms and a maximum of 25 guests at a time – it's clear that the percentage of guests who wanted to do their bit was immense.

That's because Sarojamma and the children and elderly women in her care have a special kind of magnetism, a way of moving anyone they come into contact with.

"Everyone who walks into the orphanage is affected by the energy here," says Sarojamma. "The children feel secure and when they meet guests they are open with their emotions. They are also open with their new home and allow visitors to see everything."

"Our guests just love it," adds Pawan. "We publish their comments on our website and many of them are clearly touched by the orphanage. I think that is partly because it enables them to feel like they've had a holiday where they've not just taken, but also been able to give as well. "Guests also realise that there's so much more to life than so many of the issues that we tend to struggle with. Even with so little you can still be very happy."

Sarojamma talks fondly of the Shreyas retreat. She's eternally grateful to its staff and guests for what they have helped her achieve. "The children are grateful for the life they have been given and speak with pride about the new building and its modern amenities," she says. "When they need something they ask me if I will ask Shreyas." And it was because of one such request that

two college girls were hired as tutors for the children.

Crucially, Sarojamma says, it is not just the financial support that has made a difference. Having the retreat so close by and so willing to help means that she now has confidence that nothing will go wrong. She feels protected. “In the old building, we struggled to make ends meet,” she says. “The funds we had were not sufficient or regular. I would pray every day and Shreyas has been the answer to those prayers. I can’t even think about where we would be now had Shreyas not come along.”

There are now 40 children and 20 elderly people in Sarojamma’s care – almost twice as many as before. Life at the orphanage is still simple, but with fewer worries. Thanks to Shreyas, the KVS residents can look forward to a much brighter future.