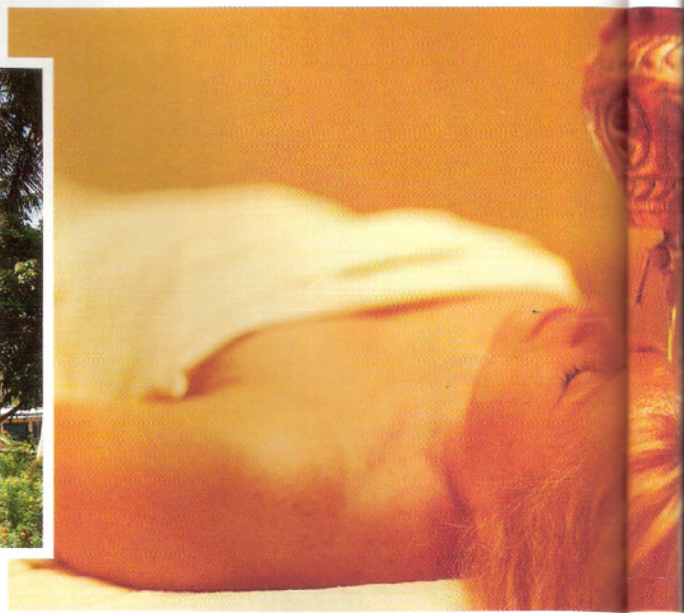


REST AND RENEWAL

Removed from the hustle and bustle of modern day, India is a quiet retreat for the bo



India, the once mystical subcontinent of the Beatles and Age of Aquarius, is now a prime destination for luxurious pampering. In the states of Goa, Kerala and Karnataka, travelers are lucky to find vacancies during high season from November to February. Fortunately, there are also secret spots off the beaten path.

Tucked away in the Ashtanga Yoga capital of Mysore is a resort that combines the centuries-old health practices of Ayurveda (sanskrit for "the science of life") with 21st century comforts and hospitality. The Indus Valley Ayurvedic Centre (IVAC) opened in 1999 and is just waiting to be discovered by travelers who value authenticity over commercial tourist traps.

For less than \$1,000, a couple can stay four days and three nights at the IVAC's best garden villa guesthouse and receive two rejuvenating massages/treatments, three healthy vegetarian meals and one relaxing yoga class every day. It's a haven of 25 acres for many Europeans – and Americans appear to be the last to know.

Treatments at IVAC range from the regular Abhyanga (whole body oil massage) and the popular Shirodhara (a continuous stream of oil poured over the forehead), to more advanced massage therapies such as Sarvangadhara, where five therapists massage and drip warm oil on the lucky client for no less than two hours (totally worth the extra \$100 to the four-day package). Panchakarma, a detoxification treatment that takes a

week or more, is also offered for those who wish to rid their bodies and minds of toxins.

After three weeks of rough traveling through South India, these descriptions on the IVAC website lured us straight up the marble staircase of the clinic, where the guest relations manager greeted us with a cup of hot honey tea and a puja, or blessing, to make us feel at home.

As we waited for a large French group to check out, we explored the colorful flower and herbal gardens surrounding the villa that would be our home for the next four days. The fronds of tall palm trees shimmied in the slight, mid-February Indian breeze. The sparkling blue waters of the swimming pool beckoned, and it was reassuring to see with my own eyes the source of the ingredients used in all the detoxifying treatments.

After check-in, an Ayurvedic physician took our pulse and asked about our metabolism and overall mental and emotional states in order to prescribe specific treatments based on our *doshas*, or bodily energy constitution. According to Indian medicine, everyone falls into one of three categories: *Vata* (air), *Pitta* (fire), or *Kapha* (water).

In preparation for my Chakra Basti treatment, Gia – a portly, strong-handed therapist who has been perfecting her skills at the IVAC for 2 1/2 years – instructed me to remove my clothes and tie a disposable undergarment around my waist and loop the thong through. She led me to a wooden chair to begin a hot oil

VAL IN INDIA

for body and soul BY KEMILA VELAN



Tropical Serenity:

Guest bungalows (at left) and doctor's quarters (background)

Bliss: Warm oil is poured over the third eye during a "shirodhara" treatment at the Mandarin Oriental, Miami

Healing Hands:

Therapists on the grounds of the Indus Valley Ayurvedic Centre

head massage. But before any massaging could be done, she and her assistant sang a Sanskrit prayer that fosters the positive healing experience.

It is this attention to detail that makes the IVAC special. The center was conceived as an openhearted place of giving and receiving the gift of health, a mission that goes beyond profit. It even encourages native Indians to attend by offering treatments at discounted prices.

That's why IVAC is a clinic, not a "spa," as my husband, Kiro Ace, was corrected by one of the therapists during his Abhyanga massage. It's about health and healing for all, not beauty and vanity for the wealthy.

As Gia rubbed oil into my scalp, combing my hair to the side piece by piece, I was lulled into a peaceful, meditative state. Her confident hands traced every muscle in my neck, shoulders and head. Even as she banged firmly on my head with her palms, she put me into a deeper ease.

I didn't open my eyes until I had to stand up to walk to the wooden massage table where they began to cover me from face to toe with almond oil. A little unsure at first, I soon relaxed under the synchronized touch of my therapists as they glided from my neck to my wrists, up and down around the ribs to my torso.

I slipped and slid around the wooden table as they worked – completely blissed out until I heard Gia ask me to sit up. Next,

my therapists seated me in a wooden cabinet with my head sticking out of a hole and closed the door. This is where complete trust in these exotic healing practitioners comes in handy. It's one thing to strip naked and let them rub you senseless, but quite another to let them close you into a tiny steamy, cabinet.

The treatment ends with a warm or cold shower – your choice – and a cup of warm water and an herbal laxative before bedtime. The next day I woke up feeling like a newborn.

Treatments are complemented by simple yet sumptuous vegetarian meals prepared by trained Ayurvedic cooks. All fruits and vegetables are organically grown on the property itself or at a nearby herbal garden.

If an 18-hour, \$1,300 British Airways flight sounds like too much hassle, Miami's Mandarin Oriental (www.mandarinoriental.com/miami) may be the practical way to experience an Ayurvedic retreat. Or, if you don't mind a drive, the Rasayana Cove Ayurvedic Retreat (www.ayurvedicretreat.com) is located just outside of Sarasota. **m**

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