

INDIA

Find inner peace in a palace

Himalayan wellness retreat offers rejuvenation with a royal twist

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POSTMEDIA NEWS

UTTARANCHAL, India — William Blake once said the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. As attentive white-gloved staff hover with chilled ginger lemon tea at the Palace Estate of a Maharaja, I wonder if this is what he meant.

I have arrived at Ananda in the Himalayas, a destination spa in Northern India nestled high above the ancient lore and ashrams of Rishikesh, often referred to as the birthplace of yoga. After a physically challenging and dirty laundry-a-ton trek across Nepal, I'm seduced by its peaceful, regal surroundings and the promise of fresh white kurta pyjamas.

I've signed up for a five-day wellness extravaganza; this means I'll have a new pair of kurtas to wear every day, all day. Even at dinner, I am assured. I'm already in Hindu heaven.

A giant oil painting of the Maharaja of Tehri-Garhwal towers over the tea room steeped in majestic history and old photographs of Indian royals. What is it still the principle residence of the king's son, in the days of the British Raj, the palace welcomed viceroys and the eminent Mahatma Gandhi and Min Tsen.

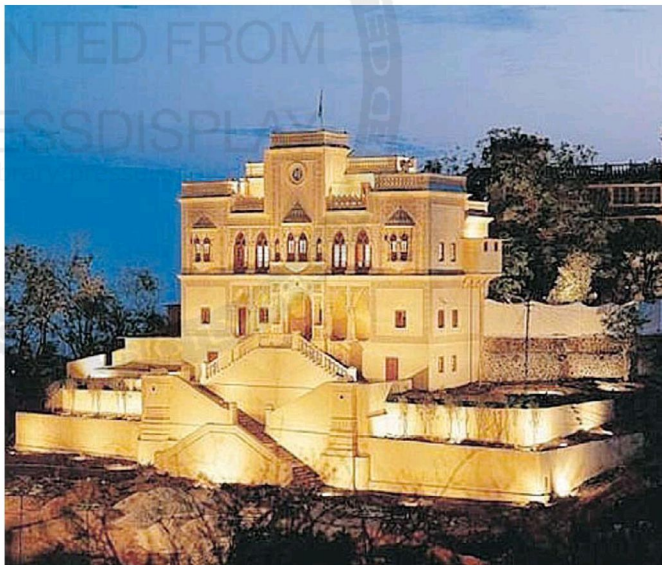
It seems to attract royalty of the Hollywood variety, with recent visits from Steven Spielberg's family, Charlize Theron and Oprah. Members of the Obama administration are also said to seek rejuvenation here.

"Namaskar." I'm welcomed by the most normal and traditional version of Namaste and am the recipient of puja, the Hindu ritual often offered to the gods; a garland around my neck and a waiting bowl of marigolds sets the tone for what's to come. In the colonial Indian tea room, spa director Ritu Srivastava presents my wellness itinerary for the week.

"The three pillars of Ananda are Ayurveda, yoga and Vedanta," she explains. "You will begin tomorrow with a consultation with the Ayurvedic doctor and then enjoy your journey of the mind, body and soul."

It seems I am fully booked up to my ashram, so I speak. Rest and rejuvenation never looked so busy and I make a mental note to schedule some time while I embrace all this wellness. The activities are all on a pick and choose basis in between glorious spa treatments.

First, Dr. Mathew Shijo uses



PHOTOS: SHANNON MELNYK



Ananda in the Himalayas, above, is a destination spa in Northern India and is often referred to as the birthplace of yoga. The staff, left, greet you with the formal version of Namaste: 'Namaskar.' The sunset Ganga Aarti ceremony, right, is a Hindu ritual.



my pulse, tongue and a variety of tests to assess my mental, physical and emotional health and explains my unique energetic constitution — known as doshas — that determine my body type and imbalances. He deems me a combination of the Vata and Pitta doshas, and

makes many diet recommendations such as warm comfort foods, no heavy spice, and sweet fruit. I am treated to a personal yoga class. The yogi Sushant helps me align my poses and offers a quiet, reflective session. I'm encouraged to take in

a chidakasha dharaana later on in the week — a tantric, visual meditation named for working on the inner space, or what one sees when the eyes are closed. More mysteries of the mind are in store as I take in a Vedanta talk. In Sanskrit, Vedanta means higher

knowledge and reflects the Hindu philosophies interpreted by Swami Parithashara. His book, Vedanta Treatise — the Eternities, is placed in every suite at Ananda. My favourite passage is "Modern civilized ones without self-development are but intellectual savages

living in spiritual slums." The Swami's disciple, Basab, speaks to us on this day about self-control versus self-denial. He encourages us to develop our intellect to conquer our overflowing minds. "Thinking is a skill; it's an art, a technique," he says. "Intelligence will not cool the mind."

If my mind is not blown by all these mental gymnastics, it is by the time I reap the reward of spa treatments good enough to pray for. The signature session Abhyanga is a full-body massage with warm sesame oil infused with herbs good for my dosha. After the puja ritual with my feet swimming in a bowl of rocks and sandal paste imprinted on the top of my head, two women sing a prayer and create an intimate space that gives way to the fragrance of ginger and cardamom.

A feast for the senses continues in what is simply known as The Restaurant. This is not the starve-you-at-the-skinny-spa. Meals are luxurious and flavourful and the servers are outright food pushers. My inner-dosha tells me to choose as I like, so I comply and celebrate it all.

On my last night, I accept an invitation to participate in the Ganga Aarti ceremony in Rishikesh. In the village, we board a boat on the river Ganga toward a massive statue of Lord Shiva, where the sunset Hindu ritual takes place.

The holy fire ceremony begins with a 104-year-old guru at the helm of the sacred herbs being thrown into the flames. Devotees chant and sway, camphor permeates the air and the glow of the myriad diyas sweeps us away during the mantra for spiritual knowledge and illumination of truth.

My truth is now an altered reality that I don't wish to leave. William Blake was right; I feel nurtured, spoiled and wise enough to know that when you stay at a palace, you'll get the royal treatment.

If you go:

YVR to Hong Kong on Cathay Pacific. Check out Cathay's new premium economy service option www.cathayair.com/cpa/en_US/vhantonboard/premiumeconomyclass
Cathay's connector Dragon Air to Delhi
Jet Airways to Dehradun
Ananda offers shuttle service from the Dehradun Jolly Grant Airport up to the Palace.
www.anandaspas.com