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Spa

Ghee and sympathy

Yoga, chanting and nothing but clarified butter for breakfast — we go ayurvedic in India

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The sign is small and handpainted: Kalari Kovilakom, Ayurvedic Treatment Centre. The place they call the Palace of Ayurveda is hidden behind high walls, not far from the interstate road that runs from Kochi through the Western Ghats and on to Tamil Nadu. The gate is locked behind me as I arrive at midnight. A tall, beautiful woman in a white and gold sari takes off my leather boots and gives me velvet flip-flops. Three sets of my uniform — white Nehru shirt and pyjama trousers — arrive in my room and are tailored to fit.

In the past five years, Kalari has gained a reputation as the most comfortable place to find authentic ayurvedic medicine in the world. There's no spa-ritual mumbo jumbo and no tweeting divorcees drinking champagne in a hot tub. The doctors dictate the entire regime here.

Nor does Kalari attract the typical mung-bean-eating India-heads who come looking for enlightenment. Fellow guests included an oligarch, a corporate lawyer, the head of a Russian bank, a consultant anaesthetist, a Mubarak-era Egyptian MP, an EU commissioner, a showbiz agent and a fat Azerbaijani grandma with tattooed eyebrows. A veritable League of Nations have voided their digestive tracts at Kalari Kovilakom. Some come seriously ill; most are suffering from western "lifestyle disorders". I arrived as someone with the beginnings of a sleeping-pill habit.

The palace was built in the late 19th century as a home for the female heads of the Vengunad dynasty. In the foothills of Kerala's moss-green Annamalai, it's peaceful, but no rural idyll: a village pond, a school and a road border the 6½ acres of grounds. What sounds like a vigorous game of tennis is women slapping laundry on the washing stone.

When the family leased the palace to the hotel group that runs Kalari, they stipulated that the palace remain strictly alcohol-free and vegetarian — no leather shoes, or even an egg, can cross its threshold. It wouldn't have made a great hotel, but it is tailor-made for ayurveda.

After the ghee, I walk the grounds, inspecting life in our little world while releasing oily burps Nobody has breakfast in their early days at Kalari, unless a daily dose of warm, medicated clarified butter is your idea of a good meal. The most commonly overheard phrase here is: “Are you off the ghee yet?” It’s drunk in panchakarma because it aids the expulsion of fat-soluble toxins. For a westerner, this is a metaphysical journey into something ritualistic, exotic and mystical; for the doctors, it’s empirical.

After the ghee, I walk the grounds, inspecting life in our little world while releasing oily burps. The schoolkids chanting, a vast banana leaf caught by a breeze, whipping back and forth — everything combines to keep us in a trance-like state. The ghee alters the mind, and it is only one part of our treatment.

There are twice-daily massages, intense, oily and pungent. The symbiotic yoga programme includes chanting and daily yoga nidra, or psychic sleep.

The ghee-drinking can last up to seven days, until the doctors deem inmates ready to start the five cleansing rituals of panchakarma. Yes, we are patients. Kalari’s official status is “hospital”. The gates are locked and guarded. There are no excursions to buy handicrafts in surrounding villages, no trips to see elephants. Once inside, nobody leaves until their last day, when the staff gather at the steps in the entrance and wave them goodbye.

There’s no telly, no radio, nothing modern except a little computer room off the library, which is well stocked with mind-improving works (Bertrand Russell, the Iliad) and junk (including farcical quantities of Eat Pray Love). The rooms are immaculate, but they could have been decorated in 2012 or 1812. If there is a journey here, then it is within. I am increasingly calm and happy, but I can’t quite shake the suspicion that I’m a bit of a wally re-enacting an episode of Ab Fab.

Guests eat what the doctor orders, based on their diagnosis, in a tradition that goes back to ayurveda’s roots, when the chef functioned as an apothecary. Lunch is cooked in stone pots and brass skillets with minuscule quantities of fat, mild spicing and vegetables such as drumstick, banana stem and endless gourds. Aside from spices and rice, almost everything is made using fresh produce. The food is transcendent, I love it. We eat in rows at tables for one, in an open dining-hall-cum-veranda that overlooks the grounds and the birds that live here with us — the eagles, treepies, woodpeckers and kingfishers, as well as butterflies the size of sparrows.

The 5.45am class is no chore: the sun rises through the trees and shafts of light steal into the yoga hall. Birdcall mixes with a comforting hubbub of temple music, bell-ringing and the odd distant truck horn. There is a trace of wood smoke in the air. The classes encompass simple stretches, pranayama — breathing - exercises — and chanting. When the Egyptian MP walks out in protest, the senior yoga teacher, who has the people skills of an intolerant maths teacher, explains sternly that chanting is about “therapeutic vibrations and not religion”. The doctors manage an exquisite, gentle charm; at these prices, so should the teacher.

There are only 18 ensuite rooms here, all original, from the little bridal suite on the top floor to the rani’s mirrored and pillared quarters. There are also secrets to find in the palace: a small shrine set in the wall; a shuttered internal window that opens to release a gust of guava and coriander; the tail of a lizard disappearing into Krishna’s ear.

After dinner, there’s the dreaded cultural entertainment, but I open my heart and let myself love everything. Given the effort involved, it would be churlish not to, although sometimes, especially at the ghee stage, I sit on the big teak bed in my cool, dark room and wonder what the bleep I am doing here. Kalari offers a mixture of health, heritage, spiritual tourism and something rare and hard to define. Sitting by the little art pagoda, watching the oligarch sketching a cormorant, the Russian banker says: “There’s magic here, isn’t there?”

The evening before I leave, a monsoon downpour has stilled the air and the sky is an ominous violet. I get a feeling like homesickness, except it is for these grounds and the 70 kind and gentle people who all have the generosity of spirit that a Salman Rushdie character calls one of the “true wonders of India”, that “hate-the-

sin-and-love-the-sinner sweetness”. We have been loved — and, in a tough world, that is the magic.

Kate Spicer travelled as a guest of Kalari Kovilakom and Oman Air

Oman Air (0844 482 2309, omanair.com) flies from Heathrow to Kochi; via Muscat; from £519. Two weeks at Kalari Kovilakom (00 91 49 2326 3737, kalarikovilakom.com) start at £3,417pp, including transfers, garments and treatments. For packages, try Ampersand Travel (020 7289 6100, ampersandtravel.com) or The Ultimate Travel Company (020 3051 8098, theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk).

Ayurvedic alternatives

Somatheeram, Kerala, India

The cottages are basic, but the setting is lovely — in gardens on a hilltop on the Malabar coast. Treatments are equally impressive and, post-massage, there’s free yoga. Somatheeram (00 91 471 226 6501, somatheeram.org) has 14-night packages, including treatments and consultations, from £1,175pp, room-only. Qatar Airways (0870 389 8090, qatarairways.com) flies from Heathrow to Trivandrum via Doha; from £491.

Ananda in the Himalayas, Uttaranchal, India

The vast spa in this former maharajah’s palace has a team of ultra-intuitive therapists and superb ayurvedic cuisine, but where the resort really excels is in the quality of its aftercare, encouraging guests to stay in touch. Health and Fitness Travel (0845 544 1936, healthandfitnesstravel.com) has a week from £2,620pp, full-board, including treatments, flights and transfers.

Purity, Kerala, India

For an intimate, almost villa-like version of a spa, try this boutique property on the banks of Lake Vembanad. The wellbeing centre is run by Kama Ayurveda, India’s trendiest spa brand, which offers a range of tempting packages. Greaves (020 7487 9111, greavesindia.com) has a week from £2,325pp, full-board, including flights, transfers, treatments and yoga.

Como Shambhala Estate, Ubud, Bali

Set in a rainforest, Como Shambhala offers treatments led by ayurvedic doctors and a team of Indonesian therapists. The food is not strictly ayurvedic, but it’s healthy and delicious. Essential Escapes (020 7284 3344, essentialescapes.co.uk) has a week from £3,499pp, full-board, including treatments, yoga, flights and transfers.

Kempinski Hotel San Lawrenz, Gozo, Malta

A five-star chain hotel is an unlikely location for a top-class ayurvedic centre, but don’t be deterred. It is staffed by a qualified Ayurvedic consultant, and the chavitti thitummu treatment — for which your masseuse holds on to a ceiling rope and uses her feet to unknot your muscles — is unforgettable. Wellbeing Escapes (0845 602 6202, wellbeingescapes.co.uk) has a week from £1,319pp, half-board, including treatments, flights and transfers.

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