

Dhyana Self Realisation at Ananda in the Himalayas

In the heart of India's Ranjipuri National Park, surrounded by mountains and forests, you couldn't find a more idyllic setting for a spa. Ananda in the Himalayas has the healing powers of nature right at its doorstep.

There's serenity in its isolation too. My journey from the UK required a minimum of two flights - into Delhi and then a short internal flight up to Dehradun. From there, it was a beautiful drive up winding, tree-clad roads.

On arrival, I was rewarded with a sense of complete stillness. At the end of a grand driveway stands the original Maharaja's palace, now an exotic entrance and reception. After a traditional and heartfelt welcome, I stepped over the palace threshold and seemingly transcended time.

I had come to experience the newest of Ananda's programmes - Dhyana Self Realisation. Long used in psychology, philosophy and Eastern religions, this expression is now seen as an integral part of our wellbeing.

Daily treatments, private yoga and meditation sessions are at the crux of the package. If you've avoided these practices thus far, Ananda's incredible setting and its teachers will make it one of the most accessible entries you can find.

Ananda's expertise is in the four ancient practices of yoga, Vedanta, meditation and Ayurveda. The latter forms an intrinsic part of the wellness regime here. From massages and special nutritional programmes to more rigorous lifestyle transformations, Ayurveda is designed to heal, cleanse, relax and revitalise.

With each programme comes a private consultation with an Ayurvedic doctor. The thorough - but fun session - included physical checks and questions about my lifestyle and personality traits. From there, the doctor prescribed a specific dosha menu for me to follow in the restaurant and gave tips on sleep, exercise and nutrition during my stay and beyond.

Complimentary group yoga classes take place every morning. Although trained in several styles, Ananda's instructors teach a very pure and traditional form of Hatha Yoga.

One-to-one yoga sessions are also included with every programme and Reema, who had a gentle, yet powerful spirit, taught mine. The practice, again accessible to all ages, levels and abilities, is structured around how you feel on the day and on the treatments you've had.

On the first morning, we sat on the grassy lawns surrounded by neon green plants, as butterflies danced over pink foliage and the resident peacock ambled by. I was reminded how nature helps us to feel more settled, at home in ourselves.

Reema very quickly gauged if I was feeling energised, or if an early morning start meant

a different approach was needed. She challenged me to find my limit but also used her experience to keep it simple.

As a tried and tested yogi, avid meditator and teacher, naively, my question was less about what I could learn and more about how relaxed and perhaps tanned (don't judge), I could be by the end of the week.

During one session however, I was told me that even with all my years of practice, I still need focus. I won't lie; my ego was a little bruised.

Ananda is rooted in the ancient Indian philosophy of Vedanta, and guests are invited to twice daily lectures on a range of topics.

There's also daily group meditation at dusk, helping to calm the mind at the end of the day. Each guided meditation focuses on a different topic and each session gently builds on the last. A fully guided Yoga Nidra - a relaxation technique known as yogic sleep - was my favourite.

Unlike at home, with all of these sessions there was no external noise, no distractions and nowhere else to be.

In the Ananda spa, men and women have separate hydrotherapy areas with sauna, steam and reflexology pools, while treatment rooms overlook the dramatic Himalayan landscape.

Specialising in Ayurveda, the spa is committed to the authenticity of this ancient life system, using traditional brass vessels, wooden beds, oils and powders. Expert therapists who begin with a beautifully sung prayer give treatment rituals, such as the fourhanded Abhayanga massage.

There's also a comprehensive range of international, fusion and beauty treatments, including Swedish, Thai and Earth Stone massage, Shiatsu and Tibetan rituals. All stays include daily use of the facilities - Steam, Sauna, Chill Plunge Pool and Kneipp Hydrotherapy Foot Bath.

Overlooking the outdoor pool is a well-equipped gym, where trainers offer individual and group sessions. There's also an on-site golf course, white water rafting trips, hikes and wildlife safaris in the surrounding mountains.

In addition, Ananda hosts regular workshops with Visiting Masters in different areas of wellbeing. Each month, teachers, therapists, healers, Ayurvedic doctors and guides visit from around the world offering their expertise to guests.

A typical day begins with a cup of warm ginger, lemon and honey, delivered to your door. At each meal, a healthy, intuitive food menu contains only the dishes suitable for your Ayurvedic body type (your dosha): Vata, Pitta or Kapha.

An impressive range of Oriental, Indian and European dishes are also offered, and the

chefs are accommodating to all manner of food intolerances. Despite being first and foremost a health retreat, tempting puddings and wine are also on the menu should you be so inclined.

Ananda is open year round, but the best times to visit are between October and April. Between June and August it can be wet, which restricts outdoor activities. You don't need to be an expert yogi - or have done it at all - as Ananda caters for all levels, however it's an adults only place.

Pack lightly as you'll spend the majority of your time in the cool and comfortable white Kurta Pyjama provided. Dress casually and don't forget your trainers for those outdoor hikes.

As well as the Dhyana Self Realisation program, Ananda offers a range of 5,7, 14 or 21 night wellness packages including Detox, Yogic Detox, Ayurvedic Rejuvenation, Weight Management, Renew, Yoga, Stress Management and Active (more details here). Each includes elements of Yoga, Ayurveda, Vedanta and Meditation as well as treatments and activities to ensure you get exactly what you need from your stay.

A seven-night programme at Ananda in the Himalayas costs from \$3,695 (£2,960) per person, based on two sharing a Palace View Room. Price includes individual wellness consultations, ongoing progress and debrief sessions, all meals from the Ananda Rejuvenation Spa Cuisine (breakfast/ lunch/ dinner) and scheduled wellness activities, talks and demonstrations. Guests can also make daily use of the Hydrotherapy facilities: Steam, Sauna, Chill Plunge Pool, and Kneipp Hydrotherapy Foot Bath. Rates include taxes but not flights and transfers.