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BARRON'S PENTA

Healing at the Somatheeram Ayurvedic Spa

A high-strung New Yorker gets a week-long ayurvedic treatment

By RICHARD C. MORAIS

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The Somatheeram ayurvedic spa is built on the jungle-filled cliffs of Kerala, India. Photograph: Courtesy of Somatheeram Ayurvedic Health Resort

I sat in the thatched-roof medical center of the Somatheeram Ayurvedic Health Resort in Kerala, southern India, a luxurious retreat devoted solely to relieving modern civilization's illnesses by applying the world's oldest holistic-healing system. Dr. C.A. Raman, the resort's revered head medical officer, was studying with furrowed brow my responses to the intake questionnaire.

Fans whooped overhead, ravens cawed, and I could hear the Indian Ocean surf crashing on the beach below the cliff-clinging resort. Clientele came and went from the medical center in monk-like crimson robes with expressions ranging from deeply disturbed to totally blissed-out. Not entirely reassuring. A male Indian friend had once confided that the ayurvedic treatments delivered by men—with their oiled hands and feet massaging way up close—had made him “totally freak out.” Others swore by it.

This 54-year-old sure needed something. I was exhausted and overworked, with high cholesterol and high blood pressure. A typical New Yorker, I'd booked a six-day “rejuvenation” package, but Dr. Raman snorted, “With all these problems, you should be here at least 30 days!” Still, I was assured they would do their best, even though they never actually explained what would happen, and I was given a sack of suspicious-looking brown syrups and pills, with instructions on how to take them. I was then ordered to follow Rajesh O.R., 29, the spa therapist assigned to me for the week.

Outside, we slipped our sandals back on and headed down the landscaped mountain, through sprays of golden trumpet and hibiscus, to the treatment hall. Rajesh softly told me his name and asked me where I was from, but my anxiety continued to mount the farther we descended. As the cobblestone path turned uneven and rough, Rajesh gently draped his arm around my lower back, his hand resting lightly on my hip, ready to catch me if I fell.

This intimate gesture instantly brought back a long-forgotten sensation from childhood, the way I felt when my older brothers would put a protective arm around me in times of danger or familial turmoil, and I knew, then, that I could completely trust this man whom I had just met. So I put my American skepticism aside, and blindly followed Rajesh through the treatment hall's dark doorway and into the ancient process meant to restore my physical, spiritual, and emotional state to a harmonious balance.

Ayurvedic medicine is focused primarily on preventing illnesses, rather than curing them. This whole-body healing system, thousands of years old, is built on the principle that we are made of five elements (ether, air, fire, water, and earth) that combine to create three “life forces,” called doshas. Although the Vata dosha (ether and air), Pitta dosha (fire and water), and Kapha dosha (water and earth) come together uniquely in each individual, only one becomes a person's dominant energy. The doshas also control different body functions, claim adherents, and the way they're balanced within a person determines the illnesses that he is likely to suffer from. After answering verbal and written questions, Dr. Raman determined I was major-league Vata (prone to anxiety, nervous disorders, heart disease, and skin problems) and minor-league Kapha (asthma, cancer, diabetes, obesity). Five medicines and daily two-hour massage treatments were prescribed accordingly, and I also took daily two-hour yoga classes, as suggested.



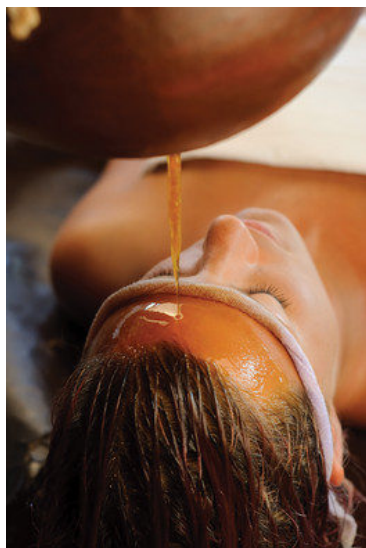


The interior of a teak cabin, built for aristocrats 300 years ago. Photograph: Courtesy of Somatheeram Ayurvedic Health Resort

The resort is a cocoon of flowering jungle, cliff, and indigenous architecture. I stayed in a Kerala Deluxe House; my terrace and hammock overlooked Chowara beach and the Catholic monastery ruins and church at the cliff's base. The teak bungalows were built for aristocrats 300 years ago, before being reconstructed in Somatheeram. I had a blue velvet divan, a round table, and a library. A massive wedding bed behind a carved screen had a mosquito net that shimmered elegantly under the fan. A sink, shower, and toilet were sheltered under an eave out back, with the rest of the bathroom in open air. When I stumbled out for relief at midnight, I was bathed in platinum light provided by the moon and stars. Now, that is luxury.

The vegetarian meals were of highest quality. Not normally an ardent fan of vegetarian cooking, I nonetheless dined superbly on everything from banana stew to fried okra with grated coconut. My six-day package included all doctors, medicines, massage treatments, yoga, lodging, and food, and came to just under \$2,200.

The treatment is intensely intimate. Shyju V.K., Rajesh's smiling second, was waiting in the treatment room, the back half of which was open to the red-earth cliff face, peppered with gecko holes and jungle shrubs. "Take everything off," Rajesh ordered.



A special ayurvedic treatment: hot herbal oils poured continuously over the forehead for 30 minutes. Photograph: Courtesy of Somatheeram Ayurvedic Health Resort

They sat me on a stool and rubbed my skin with a dry cloth before pouring herb-infused oil on me and massaging up my head and down my back. They unfolded the futon-like mattress on the floor. A ring hung from the ceiling, and Rajesh slipped a cloth through it. He washed his feet, sprinkled water on the oilcloth mattress, and then, hanging from the overhead strap, cleaned the mattress with a cloth and his feet. Rajesh and Shyju laid down a silk-like sheet under the ring, and had me lie down on my stomach with arms outstretched, perfectly aligning my body with the sheet's central seam.

They dribbled more warm oil on me, and Rajesh began dancing his oiled feet firmly up and down my back, down my butt, thighs, and calves, and over the soles of my feet. Then they flipped me over to do the front. To squeeze the toxins from lymph nodes in the groin, Rajesh ran his oiled feet tight down the inside of my thigh, rubbing where groin and leg meet. This is not a massage for the prudish or faint of heart.

In fact, at one point, I began to freak out a little over the intimate nature of the massage, but the gifted Rajesh said just the right thing to help me chill out, and right afterward, I had this amazing moment when I could feel my internal self recalibrate—a physical sense of peeling off the complexes of polite society and returning to a more primal and natural way of being.

Next, I was on the table for an astonishing four-handed massage, back and front, followed by Shyju proving his expertise: He dabbed a sweet-smelling ointment on my face, his delicate fingers minutely massaging my sinuses and brows, releasing yet more tension. Lastly, my head was tipped back and a rolled bandanna draped across my brow, under a hanging clay pot filled with herb-infused oil. Rajesh poured the warm oil stream back and forth across my forehead for a full half-hour, sending me into a delicious state of semiconsciousness, as the Christian brothers and nuns below started

chanting their ethereal thrice-daily pre-Christmas services. Then it was over. They put me in a crimson robe and told me to take a shower after an hour—the infused oils needed time to be absorbed by my skin. I was asleep by 9 p.m.

At 5 a.m., the brothers and nuns again began their exquisite hallelujahs. Their chants called me outside, and I lay down in the terrace hammock, the moon high, the ocean roaring. Village fishermen began lining up on the beach to bring in their net. I was at peace but energized, and rife with ideas, I began to write at a furious pace. By evening, my euphoria had taken on an edge, and I was having strange thoughts, fantasizing about moving to India.

Next day, the therapists used brass pots to soothingly pour warm skin-healing herbal water up and down my body. Rajesh pointed out the fish eagle sitting in the coconut tree just feet away, watching us. By evening, I was feeling manic, weird, and anxious, and my blood pressure shot up to 170/100.

Next morning, consulting with the doctor, Rajesh suggested we forgo the deepest massage, just for that day. My blood pressure came down, and other, more experienced spa guests assured me the feverish anxiety was part of the process. You are psychically shedding everything—the good and the bad—and the toxins released by the intense massage do poison your mind and body a little.

Rajesh and Shyju, hearing a little about my life, told me I was "a lucky man," their words resonating with me throughout the week. In the pre-dawn of my penultimate day, listening to the brothers and nuns singing, I was unexpectedly overtaken by a marrow-deep sense of gratitude—for the blessings I have had and the life I've been given. The ayurvedic treatments were otherworldly, and while clearly not for everyone, they made me feel younger, fit, glad to be alive—and keen to return for the recommended longer treatment.

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