



Amazing INDIA

Where to go in the center of the
wellness universe

By Rona Berg, Sandra Ramani and Kristin Vukovic



The birthplace of yoga, meditation and Ayurveda, India has long attracted travelers seeking holistic wellness and spiritual awakening. (Just think of The Beatles.) While today the subcontinent buzzes with contemporary energy—and plenty of modern, Western-style distractions—wellness tourism continues to be one

of its strongest draws, and its herbal beauty and holistic medicine traditions have evolved into booming industries. Despite the high-tech “New India,” this is still a place where locals look to nature for healing, and where the “alternative” is always mainstream. Here are some key spots at which to experience India’s healing bounty.



The Verandah Lounge
at The Imperial

THE GATEWAY

New Delhi

Regal and elegant, dotted with Colonial-era monuments and trendy hotspots, India's capital city is (along with Mumbai) one of the most popular gateways to the subcontinent, thanks to dozens of daily direct flights from around the world.

The Oberoi, Gurgaon

This striking, contemporary-style haven is located just 15 minutes from New Delhi's international airport, making it an ideal first stop. Designed with international flight schedules in mind, the city's first 24-hour full-service spa tackles jet leg with muscle-melting herbal pouch massages, invigorating lime-and-ginger body scrubs and hydrating milk-and-rose-petal baths. There's also an Olympic-size outdoor pool, and daily yoga sessions to help you get into the India frame of mind. oberoihotels.com

The Imperial

Flanked by 24 signature King Palm trees, The Imperial is more than a hotel—it's a Delhi landmark. Built in 1933, the iconic colonial-era spot now also boasts the capital's largest spa. Signature services at the gorgeous, 16,000 square-foot, Mughal royalty-



inspired space use house botanical oil blends, while traditional Ayurvedic treatments—prescribed by the in-house doctor—are performed in the specially outfitted Kerala Suite. theimperialindia.com

—Sandra Ramani

The Leela Palace

Sitting in the outdoor courtyard with a cup of tea, you can feel the warm caress of a light breeze, listen to bird calls, watch flocks of swallows. The colonnaded wall with an elephant fresco up top is such a calming sight that it's hard to believe you are in one of India's most bustling cities.

The opulent Leela in New Delhi was the first LEED Platinum building in India. Sustainability is core to the brand, as is luxury: The hotel's huge 260 rooms feature the work of contemporary Indian artists, an infinity pool on the 11th floor offers panoramic views of the city, the gorgeous spa offers a varied menu and the hotel's restaurants—Le Cirque and Megu—are strictly five star. theleela.com

—Rona Berg

THE SOUTHERN SOUL



Exterior view of the Soukya Yoga Room. Below: turmeric treatment mask.

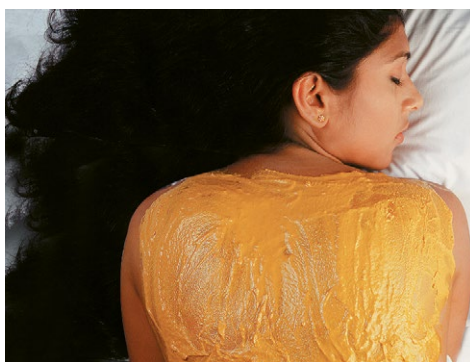
Bangalore

Soukya International Holistic Health Centre

Set amid 30 acres of organic gardens replete with herbs for treatments and vegetables for meals, Soukya—from the Sanskrit *soukhyam*, meaning “wellness”—is an oasis just an hour’s drive from bustling Bangalore.

Soukya has hosted A-listers seeking stress reduction and anti-aging treatments, as well as individuals suffering from acute medical conditions such as cirrhosis of the liver and diabetes. Dr. Isaac Mathai, Soukya’s founder, is quick to assert that his center is “not a spa” but an “integrative medical treatment facility” based on Ayurveda, the 5,000-year-old Indian “science of life.” Other holistic philosophies such as Naturopathy, Homeopathy, and Allopathy are incorporated, setting Soukya apart from purely Ayurvedic-based centers. All programs begin with a thorough medical consultation, and treatments are customized for each individual.

I’m led to a treatment room for *Dhara*, a famous Ayurvedic treatment during which a continuous stream of medicated oil is applied to the forehead and “third eye.” *Dhanwantharam*, an Ayurvedic oil blend that expels toxins and promotes



rejuvenation, is comprised of dozens of organic herbs and takes at least a week to produce. Next is *Abhyanga*, a vigorous four-handed Ayurvedic massage. Finally, I’m ushered to a steam box, and positioned on a stool with my head sticking out. I am then led to a hot shower where I’m instructed to exfoliate with a mud-like sandalwood-based scrub.

My Soukya experience culminates with an Indian reflexology session, beginning with a *tulsi* (holy basil) footbath. I feel a peculiar sensation on my toes: a wire “reflex ring,” resembling a steel pot scrubber, is put on each digit and rolled up and down, meant to promote circulation. Floating to the car on new feet, I’m off to face the chaos that is IT-infused Bangalore city life. soukya.com

—Kristin Vukovic

Kerala

Spread out on India’s southernmost tip, the lush, tropical state of Kerala is considered the seat of Ayurveda, and boasts the country’s highest concentration of holistic spas and eco-retreats. The region’s healing history is due mainly to its wealth of natural resources, and many of the natural ingredients used in Ayurvedic treatments—including camphor, neem, turmeric and mustard oil—are grown here.

The Park Kochi

Overseen by a dynamic female CEO, the hip Park chain is one of the most design-conscious and greenest brands in the country; their stunning Hyderabad property is LEED Gold certified, and all the hotels feature organic foods and herbal-based services in their Aura spas. Kerala options include The Park on Vembanad Lake, an easy-chic boutique spot with a traditional Ayurvedic spa; the Apsara Cruiser, a luxury boat that glides around scenic backwaters; and The Park Kochi (to open later this year), a modern city tower overlooking the Malabar Coast, with a dedicated spa floor, wellness programs, and panoramic yoga terrace. theparkhotels.com

Vivanta Bekal

Set on 26 seaside acres bordered by Kappil beach, this northern Kerala hideaway features 71 villas built to evoke traditional Kettuvallam backwater house boats. Enjoy kayaking, exploring historic forts, and picnicking on spice plantations before retiring to the spa for signature treatments like Chandana (a cooling sandalwood and aloe vera wrap using organic linens), Abhisheka (a cleansing/massage ritual using holy Ganges water), and Samattva (a yoga/breathing/chakra balancing combo.) vivantabytaj.com

Spice Village

From the outdoor check-in, where you customize your welcome tea with local herbs, to the mountain village-inspired cottages (topped with thatched elephant grass roofs), organic gardens and fruit orchards, and extensive sustainability programs, this award-winning eco-resort is the real deal. Spice Village has a small Ayurvedic spa on site, but for a more dedicated wellness experience, head to its sister property, Kalari Kovilakom; the 18-suite spa retreat features 10 treatment rooms, medicinal herb gardens and yoga/meditation/chanting halls. cghearth.com

—Sandra Ramani

A tray of rose-petal-infused ingredients at Ananda



THE NORTHERN HEART

Ananda Spa in the Himalayas

Ananda Spa, an hour's flight from Delhi, in the foothills of the Himalayas, is one of the most amazing places I have ever been. It is the ultimate holistic wellness experience: You will find yourself awakening to a true merging of mind, body and soul.

En route from the Dehradun airport, cows graze along the winding mountain road, and signs warn: "Beware of Wild Elephants." Monkeys scramble along tree branches. When you get to the top, the view—Garhwal Mountains, Maharaja's palace, Sal and bamboo forests and Ganges River—is breathtaking. The theme on property is the lotus, which, according to Ananda founder Ashok Khanna, "stands for peace and tranquility." And that is exactly what you will get, and more.

There are three new private villas and 75 rooms and suites on the beautiful property, all with private balconies and views down to the Ganges River. Every staffer is extraordinarily gracious and genuinely caring; you are greeted with the traditional Indian "namaskar"—"the beauty in me recognizes the beauty in you."

Maybe it's the altitude, but you really do feel like you may have known them in another life.

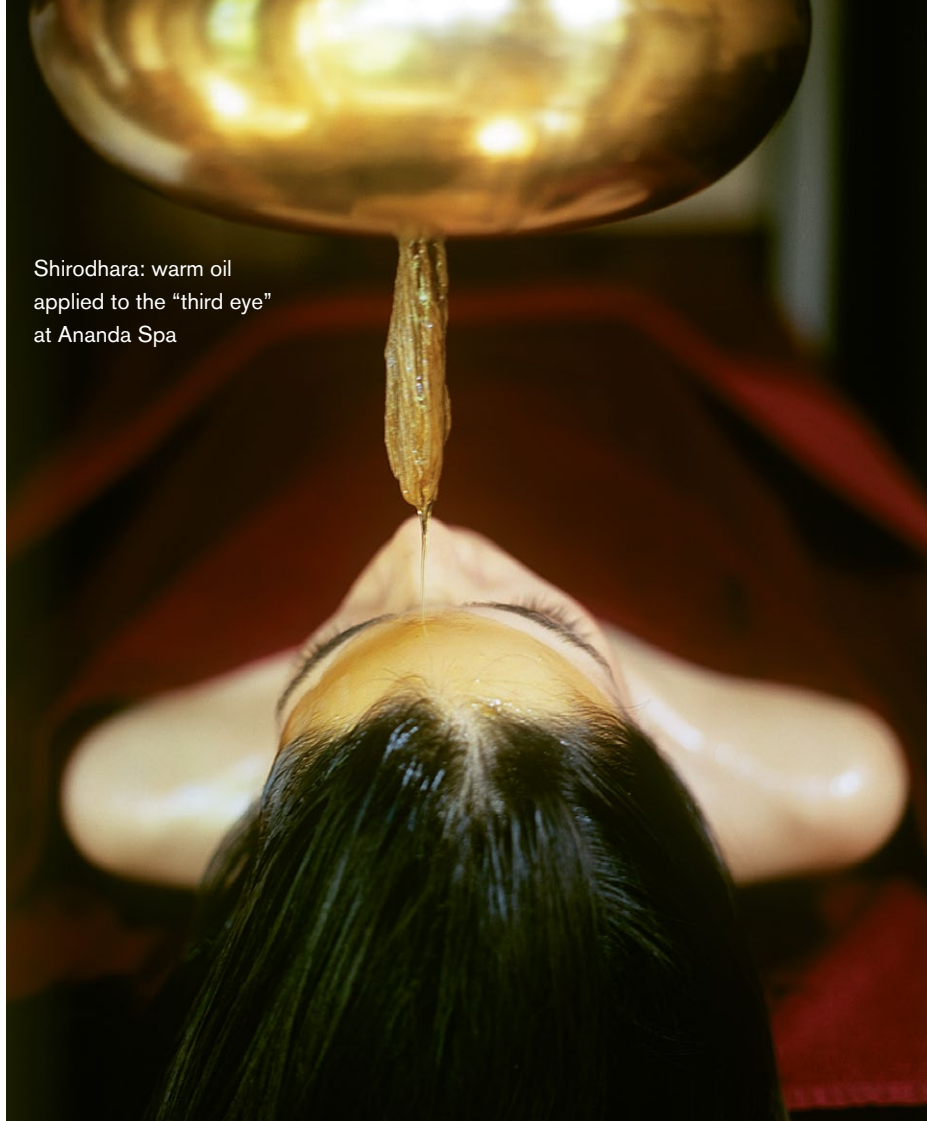
If you like to travel light you can, as each guest is provided with a set of white linen kurtis, resembling pajamas. Mornings begin with yoga in the outdoor stone amphitheater or pavilion, the quiet occasionally pierced by a noisy monkey. You can follow with a class on Vedanta, an exploration of the meaning of life.

After breakfast, visit the renowned Ananda Spa, featuring 30 treatment rooms and over 100 treatments. Though Kerala is known as the epicenter of Ayurveda, the entire region here is considered its birthplace, with herbs native to these mountains used in traditional treatments. An Ayurvedic doctor will determine your dosha, advise you on nutrition and lifestyle changes and keep track of you after you leave. The Abyanga treatment—a four-handed Ayurvedic massage—will leave you floating.

Many culinary fruits and vegetables are grown organically on the mountains. The Ananda cuisine, based on Ayurvedic principles, is low in fat and loaded with flavor thanks to Chef Ashis Rout's outstanding talent with strong or subtle spicing and fresh local ingredients. My favorite dish: a simple lemon coriander soup. (For the recipe, visit blog.organicspamagazine.com)

You will want to stay on-property, but do not miss the guided morning treks through the mountains. At the Hindu temple at top, layers of snow-capped Himalayan peaks extend far into the

Shirodhara: warm oil applied to the “third eye” at Ananda Spa



distance, to China and Tibet. The smells of roasted corn, cumin and turmeric leaves waft from a small village nearby. One afternoon, we traveled down the mountain to Rishikesh, a world-renowned spiritual center and yoga mecca, where some say yoga was born. We took part in the Aarti (Fire) Ceremony, a joyous celebration along the banks of the Ganges, where we were made to feel quite welcome.

Perhaps there is a reason why everything falls into place here: authenticity.

“Ayurveda is just one component of it,” says Mr. Khanna. “It is an Indian wellness spa based on Indian principles. Spas around the world talk about body, mind and soul, but they don’t treat them,” he continues. “They treat the body and not the soul.” At Ananda you emerge feeling truly whole. anandaspa.com

—Rona Berg

Jodhpur

Taj Umaid Bhawan Palace

At first, I think it’s a mirage: a golden-hued sandstone palace rising out of parched earth, its turrets shaped like crowns. But the Taj Umaid Bhawan Palace is no illusion. On arrival, I’m greeted by a shower of rose petals, a garland, and a welcome bindi—a red dot between my brows that represents the third eye, or sixth primary chakra ajna, the seat of concealed wisdom.

Descending the stairs to the Jiva Grande Spa, I enter another world. “Jiva Spas are rooted in the philosophy that jiva, or ‘life force,’ is the foundation of wellness,” says Spa Manager Dr. Praveen Nair, a trained Ayurvedic physician. I’m eagerly anticipating “Indian Cupping”—an ancient treatment where heat in a glass creates a vacuum to ease knots and sore points in the body, extracting toxins. To create the heat required for suction, my therapist lights the tips of rock salt pouches soaked in a blended oil of lime, rosewood and Ashwagandha, an oil that treats sore muscles. Post-cupping is an hour-long deep tissue massage. I leave feeling like putty, my chronic back pain significantly eased.

The next morning I rise early for Samattva (Balance), a three-hour one-on-one yoga session comprised of vigorous Asanas, body and mind postures; Pranayamas, controlled breathing techniques; and Kapalabhati, forced exhale breathing sequences. After pushing through these strenuous exercises, steady flame gazing slows the pace and challenges my concentration. I’m led through a guided meditation on colored gemstones, each corresponding to a chakra, and chakra chants. Finally, my therapist presents a tray of contemplation cards and invites me to choose one and meditate on the word for the rest of the day: “Forgiveness.” tajhotels.com

—Kristin Vukovic

The Taj Umaid Bhawan Palace in Jodhpur, Rajasthan

