

SURYA LANKA AYURVEDA BEACH RESORT – THE MEANING OF LIFE

By Anya Braimer Jones



A healthy retreat is just the thing I need. What could be better? I'd like to cleanse and relax — aka ridding my body of my accumulated sins. Think smoking, drinking booze and eating mounds of sugar. I'm also here to tackle the ghastly acne which inconveniently popped up on my face a few months ago. Joy of all joys. Will I be going cold turkey? Is it going to be hardcore? And what is Ayurveda anyway? ??I arrive at Surya Lanka Ayurveda Beach Resort, an Ayurvedic health retreat in Talalla, in the deep south of Sri Lanka, greeted with smiling faces and a delicious chilled King Coconut in its original packaging. I like this place already. A quick tour of the property is led by a very smiley lady in a sari. There are simple bedrooms for 50 people —only three with air conditioning —a library, a yoga hall with sides that open onto the garden and two buildings for treatments. The centre focuses on Panchakarma Ayurvedic cleansing cures and has been doing this since 1995. Indeed, it was the first Ayurveda resort in Sri Lanka to cater exclusively for Panchakarma guests. The resort offers three levels of Ayurveda programmes, allowing you to choose the intensity of the cleanse you wish to do. This is perfect for beginners but also great for your typical yoga-bunny-green-juice-loving-vegan type. Jackpot!



Lunch is under the shade of palm trees. There are buffets for lunch and dinner. It's all Ayurvedic – not the bland, salt-free green stuff I was expecting but instead, a mixture of flavours, textures, sweet, sour and spicy yumminess. I'm a big foodie and am proud to be able to stomach spicy curries like no other Westerner: a surprise to the locals. Luckily, I manage to find hot and hotter among the endless dishes on offer.

I am also astonished by the variety: chicken curry, mango curry, lentil pancakes, avocado mousse, and date cake. Plus a colourful selection of pumpkin curry, fragrant coconut and ginger soup, saffron stained rice, papaya salad, red mountain rice, and shredded coconut salad. A very welcome break from the usual rice, dhal, coconut fish curry and curd for pud that I've become used to during my travels on the island. I could go on. Before I've even had a treatment, the food is what makes Surya Lanka stand out for me – hands down the best grub in Sri Lanka.



After a leisurely stroll on the beach – a whole 50 yards along a sandy path from my room – I go and sit next to a small medicinal herb garden to wait for my initial consultation with the Ayurvedic doctor. I've read that everything from nutmeg to sandalwood, aloe vera and pineapple may be used in this system of medicine. And I am eager to discover how this array of plants might possibly help me. I understand that they're also going to diagnose my doshas (or humours) –whether I'm big on wind (Sanskrit v?ta), bile (pitta) or phlegm (kapha), and in what balance. (It turns out that I'm a fiery pitta with less of the others, since you ask.)

After a brief chat, the sari-clad doctor checks my pulse, tongue, and heart rate and –lo and behold! – informs me that I am healthy. For a hypochondriac of my calibre, this is confusing news (yet, surprisingly, music to my ears). Luckily she notes one problem, the unmentionables (shhh, spots) on my cheeks. This discovery proves that I'm not 100 per cent a hypochondriac. She starts me on a course of Ayurvedic pills – neither particularly pretty in colour, scent or flavour. But for the sake of scientific research, I am willing to give them a go.



Ayurvedic treatments and medicine have been around for thousands of years, possibly since prehistory. So I don't see why I should question what they're doing or compare their approach unfairly to the antibiotics I've been taking to date. But I am sceptical. Let's call it question mark number one. Nonetheless, I do as I'm told.

The following day, I lie down on a bed with my face looking towards the ceiling fan in the simple, hospital-style cubicle. The therapist begins my Shirodhara treatment – God knows what it is about, but it involves trickling oil onto my forehead and is supposed to help calm a 'busy mind.' Slowly, she begins gently pouring warm oil into my hair, across my temples, gently back and forth – this rocks! I can never shut up my mind – nor my mouth for that matter – but suddenly I feel at peace, at one with nature, and even the crashing sound of the waves outside the window starts slowly to recede.



My next treatment is a facial. Let's call this question mark number two. She starts with a gentle exfoliation, then places what feels like gauze over my face and begins painting on a cream. I'm sure that I can smell some sort of curd mixed with a herbal concoction, and I start to laugh. It smells like the leftovers of yesterday's lunch and is very unlike my usual chemical peels, clay masks and rose-water steams. I ask her what she's using. "Milk mixed with various herbal powders," she replies. Right ho....

The following day, I'm welcomed back for my 'HBS.' Unsure as to what I am about to experience, I lie down gingerly on the couch. The therapist begins by wiping a warm cloth over my face, arms, legs and even my feet. Next a handful of warm, nutty oil is rubbed into my skin: heavenly. The pressure is perfect; the fragrance spot on. The whole experience is 10/10. Incidentally, 'HBS' —I discover —stands for 'head, body, steam.'



Half out of it, on cloud nine, I am led afterwards to a room with a closed coffin-shaped wooden casket with a head-sized hole at one end. The therapist opens it and asks me to lie down inside. For someone like me who suffers from claustrophobia —you see, I'm not just a common hypochondriac — this rings alarm bells. But, once again, I do as I'm told. It turns out that this is the 'steam' part of HBS. Let me spell it out again: this coffin is a steam bath.

It turns out to be strange, hot, but very relaxing. I lie there with my eyes closed, motionless, my trusty therapist at my side, dabbing my perspiring forehead. As I feel the steam delicately diffusing over my body, the oil sinking into my skin, I think I may have cracked the meaning of life.



After just three days (a very brief time to sample Ayurveda) my skin is miraculously eighty per cent back to its previous dewy, baby soft stage. I am amazed. Who knew that milk — which I've avoided for years — could calm down my cheeks and forehead?!

Yes, I carried around those slight question marks of the Ayurvedic sceptic for a while. But after my first few treatments, I am sold on the Ayurvedic way. Would it be fair to say that I'm a convert? Well, all I can say is that I leave the resort feeling relaxed, rejuvenated and glowing proudly. Oh and the meaning of life that came to me whilst lying in the coffin? Ayurveda at Surya Lanka Ayurvedic Beach Resort, that's it.