

# SPIRITED AWAY

PRIZE-WINNER 2016  
MOST  
LIFE-CHANGING  
RETREAT

A SENSATIONAL HEALTH HIDEAWAY IS ESTABLISHING A NEW BENCHMARK FOR SOULFUL WELLBEING IN INDIA. SPA EXPERT DAISY FINER GETS CLARITY

THE SUN HAS SLIPPED BEHIND the sal trees of the lush forests near Dehradun in northern India. The end of the monsoon rains has rendered everything shiny and fresh. In the gardens at Vana, the country's newest and most exquisite wellbeing retreat, the warm air is heady with the scent of burning sage, and one resplendent golden rain tree is dripping little globules of water onto the carpet of grass below. All day the cries of whistling black kites and squabbling jungle babblers have provided the most melodious soundtrack, as if to say, 'this is India'. I am dressed in organic-cotton kurta pyjamas, which are provided daily and worn throughout your stay. They were specially designed for Vana by Abraham & Thakore, whose stunning brocades and rich silks have been displayed at London's V&A. Together with three other guests, I'm sitting in the yoga shala, eyes shut, in a state of blissful meditation reached in just 45 seconds. Yes, seconds. My mind is entirely blank. Afterwards I wonder why no one had taught me this phenomenally simple technique before. Dr Dhanraj Shetty, a yoga teacher of the highest order, simply instructed us to perform super-quick kapalabhati breathing and then stop. 'You will see there is a gap before taking in the next breath, a gap where your mind becomes clear. Your breathing can control your mind, just as your mind can control your breathing.' Yoga is, of course, an integral part of a stay here; there are twice-daily classes (though nothing is compulsory), alongside om-chanting sessions in the Bodhi Tree room, where you can sit under a metal tree sculpture made by Indian artist Siraj Saxena, who has created nearly 500 bespoke pieces for the hotel. I soon realise that my brief moment of transcendence is just one of the many extraordinary experiences at the Vana Malsi Estate.

FOUNDED BY VEER SINGH, who was educated in England and also trained as an organic farmer in Spain before returning to the family fold, Vana is, at last, the wellness retreat that India deserves. It marks a new dawn. It leaves all other Indian spa properties in the dust, largely because it is emphatically not just a sidekick massage and facials get-up, nor a feet-on-the-ground Ayurvedic centre. Instead, it is a global game changer, a world-class hotel with a pulsing heart. What everyone wants to know is how it compares to Ananda in the Himalayas, the only other destination spa in this part of the world. But to compare them is near futile. They simply walk different paths. Vana is clean-lined, ultra-modern and executed with no expense spared, but with deep spiritual nurturing at its core. To stay here is to partake in a sensory journey in the most cutting-edge yet comforting of settings. The bedrooms are light-filled, serene cocoons where huge windows frame views of the hills and forest; little fridges come with infused waters (pomegranate and mint) and the bathrooms are stocked with fragrant herbal products picked to suit your dosha type. The emphasis is on the curative ingredients found in nature. The Vata conditioner contains hibiscus, pea protein and rose oil; the Pitta body cleanser is packed with liquorice and sandalwood. Buy

them in the divine little shop where you will also find gorgeous bespoke clothes and traditional Indian objects. No detail here is overlooked. At night time, you need barely nod and a hot-water bottle will be tucked into your bed.

START THE DAY with gluten-free breads, delicious pistachio-and-saffron milk (I was soon addicted), perfectly ripe papaya or lightly spiced eggs. The food is inspired, organic and neither heavy nor diet-boring: stuffed peppers with cashew nuts, green beans and walnut pesto for lunch, dinners of saffron-infused paneer with ginger and amaranth sauce, and the most delicate and tempting of puddings: hazelnut brioche, banana- and-fig cake, homemade ice creams. The portions are judicious, nothing is dictated. In fact, across the board, I found Vana to be a place where you could manifest your own guidelines without anything being pushed on you. This approach is a far cry from the medi-clinics of Europe. Here, you are never made to feel bad about yourself. Everything is directed towards self-discovery. Because, above all, this is a place to stop. It is almost as if the stillness of the environment starts to saturate your body and suddenly you are able to consciously hear, express, taste, feel and experience the little things in life that perhaps have been forgotten amid the busyness. At allocated times of the day an Indian flautist starts playing – the music is like soft wind translated into sound. The name is apt; Vana means 'the forests where the pastimes of the Lord took place'. While this retreat is thoroughly forward-thinking in its conception, it is also respectful of the ancient cultures. And nowhere is this more apparent than in the therapies themselves.

UPON ARRIVAL at the hotel each guest has a consultation with one of the doctors. A comprehensive treatment plan is then carefully calibrated to restore balance and optimism of spirit. And this is where Vana again distinguishes itself. Nowhere else I know – in India or beyond – offers such a range of authentic, natural healing therapies. Unlike at other big players, such as Chiva-Som in Thailand or Clinique La Prairie in Switzerland, you won't find anything new-fangled, invasive or vanity-driven here. No cosmetic surgery. No ultrasonic micro-dermabrasion. Instead, the focus is on inner nourishing. Almost all the treatments I receive are given by two therapists, and are at least an hour and a half long. Most unique of all is the gorgeous Tibetan healing centre, with a meditation cave back-lit by Himalayan-crystal-salt lamps and tranquil treatments rooms where, for the first time ever, Sowa Rigpa (Tibetan medicine) is available as an integral part of a wellness retreat. The therapists, including head doctor Dr Sonam Dolkar Oshoe, were trained for five years at Men-Tsee-Khang, the Tibetan Medical and Astrology Institute set up by the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala.

THE THERAPIES DO NOT disappoint; they are wonderfully restorative, drawing on wisdom said to have originated from the sages of Tibet more than 3,900 years ago. Be sure to try the ku nye massage,

performed by two therapists who whisper Sanskrit mantras in your ears while little pads doused in warm oils are pressed into the energy points on your scalp and feet. After the most thorough body massage, the treatment ends with a gentle showering of natural powder to absorb the oils. Other Tibetan highs include wonderful baths, rather like swimming in herbal tea, which are so decompressing they'll send you straight to bed afterwards, as well as those fabulously old-fashioned sit-up wooden steam cabins where only your head is exposed. Dr Sonam also offers 'gom' meditation, which harnesses the healing powers of the blue Medicine Buddha; it is hard to describe quite how meaningful these are, but one woman from Bahrain admitted to me that she wept through the whole session. I am sure everyone at Vana probably cries at least once.

IN THE AYURVEDIC WING Dr Avilochan Singh, one of India's top practitioners, prescribes dedicated programmes; but you could also just dip in for the odd treatment such as the sublime four-handed abhyanga massage. Fellow fans are easily identifiable as all the Ayurvedic treatments are finished by therapists wrapping your oily hair in stylish saffron-coloured turbans to keep your head warm. Complete programmes also include the most delicious prescribed food, with some meals eaten at Anayu, Vana's dedicated Ayurvedic restaurant. Alongside Tibetan and Indian healing, Traditional Chinese Medicine also plays its part, and Dr Jitendra Uniyal, an expert in this field, is the sort of man who in taking your pulse appears to read your soul, before recommending acupuncture, moxibustion or cupping. There are also on-site nutritionists, visiting monks, sufi singing sessions and yet more must-try therapies. The private stretching with Mayank Nautiyal will rejuvenate you, and watsu with Sara Firman is a true back-to-the-womb experience. Another shining star is Azusa Segawa, who once worked at Chiva-Som, and whose chi nei tsang, a deep abdominal massage, not only detoxifies your digestive system but also works to untangle emotional blockages. The culminating effect of receiving so many outstanding therapies, layered and harmonious, is that you go home truly feeling different, physically, mentally and spiritually, as if you've been washed inside out.

ALONGSIDE THE EXTENSIVE menu of treatments, there are also steam rooms and saunas, infra-red cabins, slate-lined indoor and outdoor pools, hot tubs, a gym where even the videos being played on the workout machines are mindful, and various areas for yoga including an open-sided central shala. It is rumoured that Veer Singh has slept in each of the hotel bedrooms (there are 66 and 16 suites) just to check they meet his exacting standards, and that he has visited the outdoor pool at 2.30am, in case a guest ever does. The level of care is exceptional. As soon as I mention an inflammation on my face I am given some aloe vera straight from the garden. And when you feel the need to explore and break out of the bubble, plenty of adventures await. Take a short drive into the Mussoorie hills and you can go trekking, stopping for breakfast at Gulab Singh's hilltop farm, which has glorious views. Enjoy his chai tea with a tiffin breakfast (homemade cake, fruit) from the hotel. Visit the town of Rishikesh, the famous Indian centre of yoga and meditation, or a nearby nature reserve. Beyond the guided activities several guests independently pursue their own spiritual journeys – visiting swamis or submerging themselves in the holy waters of the Ganges. If you are seeking to reconnect with yourself, with nature, with nourishing foods and to have the sort

of conversations that ignite your passions, then go to Vana. It is sophisticated, discreet and authentic. And for now it is also relatively quiet and undiscovered. Nosy visitors (and I am sure Veer has many members of Indian society pressuring him for an in) are not allowed a fleeting visit. You commit or you don't enter. And no photography is permitted in the public spaces, which means guests can truly focus on the immediacy of the experience. It is for this reason that he is adamant Vana be called a retreat, not a spa. He is right. Vana is a world unto itself, immersive and complete. And its pledge of effective holistic healthcare is now being replicated in a brand-new non-residential wellness centre in Delhi too. Therapiya is a much smaller and more affordable set-up, with nine treatment rooms, a pharmacy, a little garden and a rest area for tea. At both outposts, after your first consultation and treatment you are required to book a flurry of appointments. Singh says, 'We intend to try to address even serious health issues here, providing an alternative to harsh drugs or even surgery.' When will England catch up?

MY STAY AT VANA is rich in experience. By the time I leave I have walked the grounds barefoot until my feet are muddy. I have sounded the gong in the temple with a new friend from Abu Dhabi. I have watched Buddhist monks perform a dawn puja. I have been stretched, twisted and thoroughly wrung out. I have laughed and cried. I have come out of my mind and into my body. The minimum stay at Vana is five nights. If that is all you have, then grab it and hold fast. But if you can, make time for longer. I am just beginning to truly unravel as I leave. I have been unlocked and I am a little open-wounded. Two weeks would be enough to seal the process and prompt a true life turnaround. If you want to embark on an Ayurvedic Panchakarma, the ultimate in spiritual cleansing, this is a three-week investment, one so profound you might even then wish to add on a little adjustment time afterwards.

I CAN'T SAY which of Vana's many programmes you should choose – that's where the wisdom and kindness of the doctors comes in. Some guests arrive obsessed by weight loss only to be told what they really need to do is de-stress. But what I know is this: Vana is the most sensitive, high-end, A-grade retreat I have come across. I met teachers in both the doctors and the other guests, while also noting that nobody can teach me better than myself, if I just tune in and listen. I no longer feel the low-level but consistent panic that had been my partner in crime for too long. I am happy in my own skin. As Dr Uniyal said to me, 'There are only two things in this life: fear and love. Remove the fear, and you have love.' Through its own special mix of nurturing, Vana dispels fear and restores faith. Such is its magnitude. Such is its grace. I'd like every vibrational soul I know to go, and many more besides.

**BOOK IT** Healing Holidays (+44 20 7843 3592; [healingholidays.co.uk/condenast](http://healingholidays.co.uk/condenast)) offers a seven-night wellness programme at Vana Malsi Estate from £1,995 per person, full board, including flights, transfers, wellness consultations and daily spa treatments. **HEALING HOLIDAYS EXCLUSIVE** Fast track on arrival at Delhi Airport and one optional complimentary night at The Lodhi in Delhi on the return journey.