



ANANDA IN THE HIMALAYAS

UTTARAKHAND, INDIA

MEDITATION AND MEANINGFUL LIFE SKILLS NEAR THE BIRTHPLACE OF YOGA

Rather surprisingly, the spiritual state of mind nirvana doesn't really exist for the practitioners at Ananda, nor does the concept of zen. Instead the mantra at this hill-top maharaja's palace, converted into a hotel in 2001 by founder Ashok Khanna, is about finding joy through balance – something that can be integrated into daily life in a structured and positive way. And certainly after a week's stay, supported by an intense timetable of breathing, meditation, yoga and *vedanta* instruction, all the while eating delicious Ayurvedic food, a joyous and enriching sense of enlightenment does actually descend upon you.

Far from being a quick fix, the programmes here are among the most authentic in India, with resident teachers such as Sandeep Agarwalla.

If you're looking for a rocket-paced practice, or prefer to stretch out by hanging from a harness, this place is not for you. If, on the other hand, you're a perfectionist and want to relearn the postures you thought you had already mastered, then it's exceptional. The Dhyana retreat includes daily lessons in breathing, *asana* and several types of meditation from the universally respected Bihar method (chanting, silent observation, or *antar mouna*, and horizontal awareness, or *yoga nidra*, are just some of the offerings). These are interspersed with deeply relaxing traditional massages and facials. And there's plenty of time for extra-curricular pursuits too. Make sure you head out on a hike in the Himalayan foothills, passing through pretty villages where children giggle as they make their way back from washing on the sun-drenched terraces. It's also worth taking a trip down to the colourful, chaotic town of Rishikesh to take part in a Hindu ceremony where three of the holy rivers converge – the

Ganges, the Yamuna and the Saraswathy; to see where the Beatles visited the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1968, or to stock up on colourful fabrics while dodging the meandering cows. Alternatively, just loll by the pool at the hotel where you'll spot the occasional fashion photographer or Middle Eastern sheikh – fellow guests are a mixture of well-heeled, eco-conscious yogis and those in need of some proper rest. Everyone from Oprah Winfrey to the Prince of Wales has stayed here over the years. It's easy to spot the new arrivals, still wearing their Western garb – old hands are head-to-toe

in white *kurta* pyjamas, a fresh pair of which is delivered to your room every evening. The nurturing rhythm of the place is hypnotic. By the end of the week it's a wrench to tear yourself away, but Ananda has its own app with

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Ayurvedic recipes to follow after you leave, and each guest departs with a folder of detailed, personalised follow-up notes so they can continue the calming, quietening good work. With such a solid foundation and some dedicated focus, there's every chance the permeating mindfulness of this place could stay with you for a long time.

INSIDER TIP While doing meditation with your personal teacher outdoors, record the session on your phone so you can tune into it as a guided practice back home, with the sounds of the birds in the background and the memories of bright-blue skies and jacaranda trees swaying gently in the breeze.

BOOK IT Healing Holidays (+44 20 7843 3592; healingholidays.co.uk/condenast) offers a seven-night Comprehensive Wellness programme from £3,625 per person, full board, including flights and transfers.