



## THE SPA IN FOCUS VANA, INDIA

WELL-BEING EXPERT DAISY FINER HAS REVIEWED THE BEST DESTINATION RETREATS AROUND. YET FOR THE SLICKEST REBOOT, SHE GOES BACK TO THE MODERN INDIAN OUTPOST WHERE AGE-OLD THERAPIES SHINE



FEW THINGS HAVE changed at Vana since I first visited, a year after it opened in 2014. Back then it was by far the most progressive and comprehensive of any Indian spa I'd ever experienced. And despite renovations and improvements at its chief competitor, Ananda in the Himalayas, Vana, with its beautifully hushed ashram environment, retains the edge when it comes to spiritual luxury. I've been to pretty much every top destination spa in the world, and for release and recuperation I believe there is nowhere better.

For some, the bubble-like atmosphere at Vana can be a challenge. A stay here requires five nights minimum. Phones aren't allowed in public, and social media is forbidden (you actually have to sign something). But no detail is overlooked. The turmeric-and-ginger latte is the best you've ever tasted. The in-house bathroom goodies smell divine. Owner Veer Singh, who quietly exudes his own palpably healing energy, has personally chosen the selection of inspirational literature. The design is sharp, astounding even: a wall made of backlit pink Himalayan salt bricks, corridors lined in mysteriously beguiling images of the Buddha, lighting that lends a cool edge, and polished modern interiors (Spanish architectural firm Esteva i Esteva is responsible for the look) peppered with exquisite Indian touches—bowls of flowers, a candlelit statue of Ganesh, an underground tantric-meditation cave. Views of a verdant sal forest straight out your bedroom window complete the picture of serenity, along with a vegetable garden, an open-sided yoga *shala*, a sleek swimming pool with steam and infrared zones, and a series of impressive treatment wings, each dedicated to a different modality.

The scale of the various therapy areas is perfectly reflective of Vana's commitment to purpose. It is the 360-degree individualized approach to health here that positions India's big player next to spas like Thailand's Kamalaya or Chiva-Som. Each visit begins with a consultation with a doctor (who also checks in on your progress >



► mid retreat and before you leave). You'll be asked all about your life—sleep patterns, movement, routine, how you deal with stress, any issues you want to address. Every guest is then given a prescription of treatments, classes, and advice that draws on the impressive array of offerings that Vana so gently delivers. No one is on the same program. There's an Ayurvedic center and a separate Ayurvedic restaurant; a natural-therapy wing with the likes of reflexology, five-elements acupuncture, and craniosacral therapy; a high-tech gym; and, for me, the absolute highlight, the Sowa Rigpa center.

Also known as traditional Tibetan medicine, Sowa Rigpa has its roots in Ayurveda, Chinese medicine, and Buddhism. This amalgamation makes it truly unique, and the doctors and therapists at Vana are alumni of the Institute of Tibetan Medicine and Astrology,

dishes are tempting. Breakfast is also a treat: masala omelets, pistachio milk, homemade yogurt, and kombucha. The point is not to deprive yourself but to find your own way. Tune in to what your body needs. Nature holds the answers: This is the backbone to life at Vana. There's fresh aloe vera in the gardens in case of sunburn; daily afternoon tea involves brewing freshly picked herbs; and the Vana calendar marks not just the seasons but auspicious dates, the phases of the moon, festivals, and important days of prayer. There is something truly honoring and authentic in the approach. Ritual, music, food, and creative expression are all woven into the melody.

A carefully curated selection of activities punctuates the days. There are three different yoga classes daily, talks on everything from the art of traditional Chinese medicine to the *Yoga Sutras* of

## UNLIKE THE DETOX CLINICS OF EUROPE, THERE ARE NO FINITE RULES. YOU FIND YOUR OWN FLOW. ENERGY RISES. VITAL LIFE FORCE IS REBORN

Men-Tsee-Khang. Treatments start with the calling in of the healing powers of Blue Medicine Buddha, and bring in herbs, therapeutic oils as prescribed in ancient Tibetan medicine texts, warm poultices, body-releasing and scalp-easing touch, and hot towels on feet. After one of my 75-minute sessions, I am lolling in an armchair in the relaxation area, sipping smoky herbal tea, warm in my kidneys and to my bones. In the background the sound of earthy sanctified Tibetan chanting is soaking the air in peaceful vibrations. I catch eyes with a woman sitting opposite me. "Are you floating?" she asks. I nod in the affirmative.

Food is definitely a highlight at Vana. Don't come expecting to starve. Several of the guests I spoke to were worried that they'd actually *put on* pounds. The micro desserts, especially the crème brûlée, are hard to resist, and the vast help-yourself lunches of soups, homemade breads, vegetable curries, dal, paneer, and fish and meat

*Patanjali*, lessons in om chanting, body-weight circuit training, walking meditation, and trips to Rishikesh to perform Aarti, a ritual in which votives and flowers are set afloat on the Ganges as the four elements combine in perfect synergy.

No wonder Vana has found its following. As a center of mental and spiritual balance, it has matured into a place I would recommend to even the fussiest. Everything here is about comfort levels. There's nothing too raw or new-fangled or invasive. Unlike the detox clinics of Europe, there are no finite rules. You find your own flow; you and your body are treated with reverence. Problems ease. Energy rises. Vital life force is reborn. When I meet up with friends two weeks after my stay they comment on the fact that I can't stop smiling. Something in me has dissipated. Life is starting to feel good again. Sometimes, it's as much about what you take home with you as it is the experience itself. 🕉

Healing Holidays (inquiries@healingholidays.com; 646-568-9943) offers a seven-night Ashram program at Vana from \$2,350 per person, sharing a Forest room, with full board and program, including return domestic flights from Delhi to Dehradun