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# Mending mind and soul in the mountains: How I mastered the art of detox on an Ayurvedic retreat in the Western Ghats



The Dharana Wellness Retreat at Shillim is one of India's most comprehensive Ayurvedic retreats

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9 JANUARY 2020 • 10:59AM

**B**ouncing our way along a serpentine, potholed track, overlooking a backdrop of wheat fields and rice paddies, it seemed nothing short of miraculous that anywhere within a three-hour drive from the megalopolis of Mumbai could be so serene. Tailing an antiquated Enfield, with not one but three septuagenarians aboard (robed in traditional Marathi dhotis, topi and all), we passed a girl, carrying a copper pot on her head with the balance and poise of a tightrope walker. Schoolchildren used the road as their personal cricket pitch, whilst a herd of obstinate heifers gawked at us, the only oncoming traffic.

I was more than 2,000ft above sea level, atop the Sahyadri mountain range, in a tiny village called Shilimb to be exact, home to what is lauded as one of India's most comprehensive Ayurvedic retreats: Dharana Wellness Retreat at Shillim. Yet, despite the state-of-the-art facilities, it is the bucolic existence that this close-knit, Maharashtrian farming community has managed to uphold and that Dharana Wellness Retreat aims to incorporate into its wellness programmes. Far more than your average detox, its multifaceted approach to well-being aims to eschew the stress and freneticism of modern-day living in favour of a slower pace. Following the principles of Ayurveda (Indian herbal medicine), each of the estate's programmes are based on the concept of "dharana", the sixth limb of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, often translated as meaning "steady focus", or as Dr Arun Pillai put it during my first consultation, "the stable sense of sacredness that is achieved when one aligns their inner core to their outer environment". My thoughts exactly.

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The hotel eschews the stress and freneticism of modern-day living in favour of a slower pace

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A 320-acre resort advocating sustainable living, set within the Western Ghats – a Unesco World Heritage site and biodiversity hotspot home to more than 800 species of animal, might seem counterintuitive but the surrounding habitat and its population are at the forefront of the property's identity. From employing local staff to growing as much of their own produce as possible – and sourcing anything they can't from nearby Pune or Mumbai – and a zero-tolerance policy on single-use plastics, huge efforts are being made for this vast complex to give back to the communities surrounding it.

Once booked, a comprehensive questionnaire is sent, where soon-to-be guests are asked to fill in details ranging from the innocuous “height and weight” to whether they would describe their extremities as “long and tapering”, in keeping with Ayurvedic diagnoses. Following this, a programme is tailored to your goals and requirements. Retreats range from five-, seven-, and up to 28-night stays including the “Art of Detox”, “Age Reversal”, and Ayurvedic favourite, “Panchakarma” – a five-step healing programme involving lots of herbal oil massages and an entirely “Sattvic” diet (a specific vegetarian diet). Administered by a team of medically trained doctors, it's Ayurveda according to science, if you will.



The hotel is located 2,000ft above sea level atop the Sahyadri mountain range

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I signed myself up for the five-night, “Art of Detox” programme, which aims to rid the system of oxidants and restore normal metabolic functions, and brings me back to my first consultation with Dr Pillai. Having taken my biometrics (BMI, body composition and blood pressure), he proceeded to diagnose my “doshas”. According to Ayurveda, all humans are made up of a combination of three doshas: Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. “You are a classic case of Vata,” he tells me, “with a totally overactive Pitta”: light-hearted yet fickle, with a tendency towards stubbornness. Seldom have I received a more accurate character reference from a man I'd just met.

The aim? To bring my pitta back to normal functioning order, which

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included going cold turkey on caffeine, no spicy foods, and gentle to slow-paced activities - something that this coffee-drinking, curry-loving, high-intensity exercising individual would learn to embrace over the next few days. In fact, during my stay, life developed a pleasantly languorous rhythm. Wake up, a gentle open-air yoga class, meditation, followed by a light breakfast of fruits and cereals, and an almost daily pre-lunch, pre-dinner massage. Each evening, relaxing amid the minimalist surroundings of my one-bedroom pool villa (all wood, stone, and verdant vistas), I would be presented with a fresh set of gleaming white "kurta" pyjamas (the uniform for the duration of my stay) and the following day's timetable.



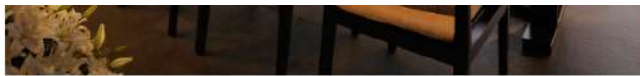
From morning yoga to healthy eating, life at the hotel takes on a pleasantly languorous rhythm

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"You'll notice there's no gym," General Manager Srikant Peri pointed out to me. The Dharana approach is not about counting calories on the treadmill. "We believe that wellness should be about living a balanced existence, harmonised between diet, exercise and lifestyle," he explained. Everything, from the clean lines and natural materials of Shillim's modernist architecture to the Green Table's dosha-balancing menu, emanates this harmonised approach to wellness. Aside from making time to lounge by the pool or soak in your villa's cavernous stone bath, activities include a sunrise trek to Shillim Peak, pottery (they call it "clay therapy"), Tibetan singing-bowl meditation, and a one-on-one "animal flow" class - 60 minutes grappling around on the floor transitioning from "bear", to "dog", to "crab" and back again. As well as time spent grooming the resident Marwari horses. It's estimated that as adults we make around 33,000 choices a day, but here I am all but hand-held between treatments, classes and meals. Operating a no-child policy, it's a sort of crèche for grown-ups, where you're spared the trouble of decision making.

Day four was the hardest. Lulled into a false sense of security by the comfort of my routine thus far, my suspicions did not arise when I received my schedule simply stating that I would be partaking in "Virechana" and should report to the doctor's office by 10am. A lie-in, I thought. Brilliant. A bowl containing a brown claylike substance was handed to me instead of breakfast. "It's sort of like chocolate pudding," the practitioner, who had clearly never eaten a chocolate pudding, assured me, as I gulped down mouthfuls of the herbaceous, honey-sweetened paste.





Food is so flavoursome you're quick to forget it's free from sugar, salt, or refined flours

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Undergoing one of the favoured purgative treatments of Panchakarma, by 11am I was prostrate on my bed, noting down the exact timings of my, ahem, “movements”. By 6pm I was back in working order and was allowed my first meal of the day: the most delicious lukewarm porridge I have tasted in my life, followed by a full-body Abhyanga massage. Liberal amounts of warm, piquant oils administered from head to toe, created the soporific effect of lulling me into a deep sleep. By the following morning, I'd lost several pounds and my caffeine-withdrawal headache? Gone.

Ayurvedic retreats usually have all the charm of a hospital waiting room, but at Dharana Wellness Retreat sprawling one-bedroom villas are paired with food so flavoursome you're quick to forget it's free from sugar, salt, or refined flours. Far removed from our modern lifestyles, initially, it feels alien to partake in such “Ayurvoodoo” rituals. Why can't I eat salad in the evenings? And why do I need my tongue scraped? They're questions I might never understand the answers to, but, whether you believe in doshas or not, it is the shifting down a gear, that I, and we, all so desperately need.

*Healing Holidays (020 3372 6945; [healingholidays.com](http://healingholidays.com)) offers a five-night Art of Detox programme from £2,555pp. Includes flights, full board accommodation and transfers.*



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