



ESCAPE

A PASSAGE TO INDIA

From urban oases to Himalayan havens, via ayurvedic sanctuaries, India opens her arms wide. Run to her embrace. By **Daisy Finer** and **Caroline Phillips**

WILDFLOWER HALL, SHIMLA IN THE HIMALAYAS – AN OBEROI RESORT, *Shimla*

Peeping out above a pine forest, Oberoi's mountain retreat in the foothills of the Himalayas can't help but sweep you off your feet. Built on the site of Lord Kitchener's summer residence, it's Alpine lodge meets colonial old-world charm. The 85 rooms with marble bathrooms are calm, neutral and cosy with Burmese teak panels, roaring fires and polished parquet floors. Best of all are the floor-to-ceiling windows which max out the spectacular snow-capped view. The main restaurant mixes local specialities with international cuisine – ask for a table in the conservatory so you can fully lap up the verdant surrounds. Days are filled with woodland walks, mountain biking, white-water rafting and golf. Shimla, once the summer capital of the British Raj, is just under an hour's drive away. There's great shopping there but it's more about the extraordinary all-out Britishness of the town with baronial-style architecture, racecourse, cricket ground (the highest in the world at over 8,000ft) and an ice rink. Back at base, flop in the glass-walled spa, hidden in the forest, which has sublime ayurvedic treatments.

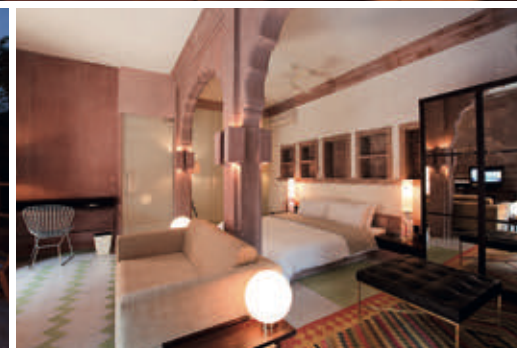
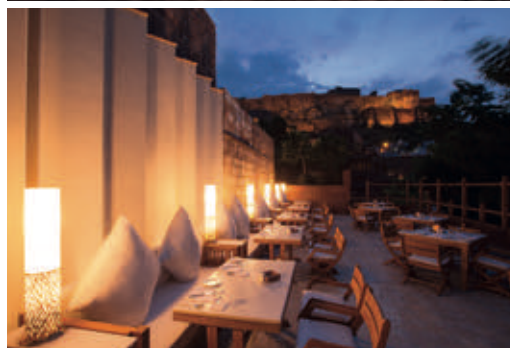
BOOK IT: Doubles from approx. £390. oberoihotels.com



RAAS JODHPUR, *Jodhpur*

With famously startling views up to Jodhpur's 15th-century Mehrangarh Fort, which looks especially magical at night, this sleek, chic 39-bedroom boutique hotel was the first of its kind in India. Merging both modern and ancient styles, it combines rose sandstone, jaali slashed shutters and splashes of Brahmin blue paintwork with beautifully designed pared-back interiors, contemporary furniture, outdoor terraces and snappy staff. The courtyard swimming pool is a quiet oasis: complete with white canopied sunbeds and a delicious menu of salads and light lunches. Both the hotel's restaurants major in organic herbs and vegetables grown in the grounds – and, in keeping with the old-meets-new philosophy, you can feast on everything from Rajasthani curries to margherita pizzas or pad Thai. Children are welcome, and there's a gorgeous small spa to boot. A winner. Check out the new suites if you want to go all out.

BOOK IT: Doubles from approx. £127.
raasjodhpur.com



THE IMPERIAL, *Delhi*

With a refined, slightly formal atmosphere, The Imperial isn't about what's hip or trendy, instead it offers a step back to Anglo-Indian colonial-era nostalgia, complete with vintage photographs, rattan furniture, vast marble floors, and bedrooms swathed in thick curtains. Of the four restaurants The Spice Route is the prettiest with hand-painted wall murals, potted palms and the best mulligatawny soup ever. The bookshop is one of the best in India and the spa won't disappoint either – it's architecturally stunning with elaborate wooden doors, beautiful arches, plenty of wide, cool spaces and a team who really care for your wellbeing. Treatments span from ayurvedic to signature massages. And, of course, when you want a break from Delhi's traffic – which seemingly gets worse and worse – the lovely outdoor swimming pool awaits. A blissful escape.

BOOK IT: Doubles from £200 B&B.
theimperialindia.com

NEED TO KNOW

For advice on these and other delicious places to stay, from boutique urban gems to private palaces, wellness retreats, trains, river cruises and safaris contact Greaves Travel who also have at their expert fingertips the best in guides, naturalists, personal shoppers and yogis.
020 7487 9111.
greavesindia.co.uk



AND YOU CAN'T COME TO INDIA WITHOUT SOME AYURVEDIC INDULGENCE...

SWASWARA, *Karnataka*

Imagine 26 acres next to Om beach and the Arabian Sea for an Ayurveda Rejuvenation holiday to perk you up quickly using the ancient principles of ayurveda – but without any of that nasty guzzling of medicated ghee or purging. You'll sleep in a thatched villa (one of 24) of local stone with an al fresco shower that lures inquisitive monkeys. After your ayurveda doc's thumbs up, you'll get stuck into daily group asanas (yogic poses) and learn more meditation and breathing techniques than most have had ayurvedic hot dinners. And bliss out with massages – therapeutically prescribed, natch – appropriate for your dosha (or body humor) from shirodhara (a trickle of warm, medicated oil poured onto your forehead) to kizhi massages with toasty medicinal poultices. There's also meditative art and pottery, a boat cruise to Gokarna (think pilgrims, holy cows and temples) and interactive cookery classes. In between all these de-stressing activities, you'll chat to smart Euro money or relax in the open-sided restaurant or beachside grill sipping warm herbal water and eating raw banana dosa and tamarind roti – your dosha-specific diet. Impossible not to leave with a spring in your step and joy in your heart.

BOOK IT: Seven-night Ayurveda Rejuvenation, approx. £2,205. swaswara.com



SOUKYA, *Bangalore*

When the NHS decided to launch ayurveda and yoga in a London facility, it was to Soukya's co-founder, Dr Mathai, that they turned. (It helps that he's also one of Prince Charles' doctors.) Although Soukya does pampering breaks (hot stone to four-handed massages), it's more hospital than spa. They offer a combo of traditional systems and complementary therapies, tackling mild eczema to diabetes. There are lots of rules – if you sneak a fag, you're fined \$5,000 – to make treatments more effective. This doesn't deter its starry clientele – from the Duchess of Cornwall (five visits) to Archbishop Desmond Tutu (three stays). Food is tasty sattvic (full of positive vibrations), vegetarian and grown midst tropical flowers on the 30 organic acres surrounding the 25 bungalows. Decor is provincial Indian and a bit tired. But the treatments are spot on: highly individualised – you may have acupuncture, homeopathy and mud therapy on one day – and the doctors and therapists are top notch. When you're not supine, there's daily yoga and meditation, tours with a sari-clad doctor of their ayurvedic medicinal garden and their onsite production of medicated oils with bubbling cauldrons of herbal concoctions. You'll leave with luminescent skin, Himalayan-crystal clear eyes, inches loss and good intentions.

BOOK IT: Seven nights, from £2,800. soukya.com



BEST
FOR HEALTH
RE-BOOT



BEST
FOR
SILENCE



SHREYAS, *Bangalore*

After a wellness consultation with a kurta-clad ayurvedic doc, you'll don a necklace emblazoned Sshhhreyas – so people know you're not talking. You're doing mouna – the practice of silence – although there's a pen and paper for essential communications. Days pass in an illuminating way with guided trataka (candle meditation) and yoga nidra (a state between sleep and wakefulness), alongside pranayama (yogic breathing exercises), massages and group chanting. Plus guided walking meditations in 25 acres with bougainvillea and jackfruit trees. Bag a garden cottage with a cool tented ceiling and shower open to the sky. At meals you'll be seated alone (helps you keep schtum) as you savour – mindfully, please – your white millet roti and aubergine masala, everything organic and veggie. Soon aware of your inner conversation and behaviour patterns that cause you stress, you'll wake brightly for 6 30am group yoga in the yoga shala amid twittering jungle birds and wafts of sandalwood, then fall asleep at night with a meditative thought (they pop a spiritual quote from the likes of Osho on your pillow). And you'll leave with a bit of clarity and peace.

BOOK IT: Seven-night Silent Retreat, from \$2,290 single occupancy. shreyasretreat.com