



A sneaky sip of booze risks a \$5,000 fine – but this celebrity-approved holistic retreat delivers results...

# ALL IS WELLNESS

Words Caroline Phillips

**THERE'S A TERRACOTTA POT** of milk and herbs that the therapist is moving slowly back and forth above me, as a steady trickle of warm liquid pours onto my forehead. I'm lying on a traditional Indian wood massage bed having a Ksheeradhara – a treatment said to bring about hormonal balance.

I'm at Soukya, Dr Isaac Mathai's International Holistic Health Centre in Bangalore, India. Recently, some of Soukya's treatments, medicated herbal oils and Ayurvedic dietary advice were introduced by the NHS, as it opened its first centre for traditional Indian medicine at London's St Charles Hospital. The initiative was inspired, in part, by Dr Mathai, homeopath and holistic doctor to Prince Charles.

Soukya – where a wellness stay starts at £2,800 per week, and a medical one at £4,000 – attracts A-listers. 'Dr Mathai is one of the most competent holistic doctors in the world,' says Deepak Chopra, a former guest. Other guests (not patients) have included Emma Thompson, the Duchess of Cornwall (five times) and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, while Fergie met the Indian spiritual master Sai Baba there, and he plucked a gold crucifix out of thin air for her.

I'm introduced to Soukya at Viavi, London, which offers health management services to HNWs. Dr Sabine Donnai, its Chief Executive, credits Soukya with her own speedy recovery from chemo. My mission is to find better ways to deal with

my 'black dog' without chemicals, and to lose weight. She runs blood and urine tests, for 'before' and 'after' scientific markers. In terms of preparing for a trip, this sure beats getting an E-visa.

My results show some segments of my DNA bound to Patulin, a toxin, and also to Copper complex ('Maybe from hair dye,' she suggests). The Copper is 'dangerously high,' and potentially leads to carcinogenesis.

A short time later, I'm at Soukya sporting a flower garland, signing a contract that reads: 'Smoking, intoxicants, alcohol and non-vegetarian food strictly prohibited inside Soukya'. Flouting these directives leads to a \$5,000 (£3,546) fine and immediate discharge with no refund. 'Please,' it adds, 'do not walk out of your room between 10pm-6am, as we expect you to enjoy eight hours of sleep.' The rules, Dr Mathai explains, help make treatments more effective. Any fines go towards subsidising the city, and the rural clinics that he runs for the needy.

Soukya is more like a hospital than a spa – albeit a hospital with a swimming pool, yoga hall and beautiful grounds. It achieves scientifically measurable results in conditions for which Western medicine has no cure. 'We've arrested or reversed diabetes, thrombosis, cancer, multiple sclerosis, bleeding liver, infertility and IBS,' reports Dr Suja Isaac, nutritionist and wife of Dr Mathai.

It's set in 30 organic acres on the outskirts of Bangalore. Kingfishers flit past, while three tethered sheep nibble the lawn. My bedroom is one of 25 bungalows, its aesthetic more middle-class Indian home than five-star hotel, >

“STAPS HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO MILK THE COWS OR DO GARDENING



Nirvana is easily achieved within Soukya's breath-taking gardens



the bathroom a relic of Soukya's 2002 opening. But it's all about healing, not glamour. There's even a welcome pack of Dr Mathai's health books, yoga pyjamas and Ayurvedic goodies.

Some guests come for feel-good breaks (massages, reflexology, activities). But most check in for bespoke, highly individualised medical programmes, from Panchakarma (a thorough detox) to asthma and stress management, smoking cessation, weight-loss and cardiac hypertension. It offers holistic and integrative medicine – healthcare that takes a wider, preventative approach by addressing the underlying social, lifestyle and environmental causes of disease – and combines the best of different traditional systems and complementary therapies. It provides Ayurveda, Yoga, Naturopathy (which encompasses everything from hot stone massage to medicated packs and mud therapy) and Homeopathy. Allopathic consultants are approached for diagnostics and medical technologies, as necessary.

Soon it's time for lunch on a terrace overlooking a lawn on which there's a gigantic door, symbolising an openness to healing. There are tropical flowers and fruit trees and, nearby, that field of green veggies – everything organic and nourished by natural pesticide made from the urine of the cows who live on this city farm (even the cooking is done using biogas made from their dung).

As for the food – it's mwah. Five or so little dishes of freshly prepared Indian specialities – healthy soups, bowls of mildly spiced veggies, Indian breads – plus a different regional cuisine represented at each set meal. It's vegetarian, seasonal, low fat, low salt and low spice, too. The food is apparently filled with positive vibrations. 'It's a sathwic diet, which helps the mind and body to get in balance,' explains Dr Mathai. 'The ingredients have different qualities: peppers excite, salad calms, for instance.'

My fellow diners include Francesca Piamonte, an Italian interpreter on her thirteenth visit with her husband, the IT billionaire Shiv Nadar (who's had a satellite dish fixed to his Soukya bungalow); British portrait artist, Annabel Merrett; plus Prince Charles's medical advisor, Dr Michael Dixon and his artist wife, Joanna.



Daily group yoga is a key element of the regimen

'Every time I come I get better and better,' says Francesca. 'I was a physical and emotional wreck on my first visit.' A train bombs past noisily and often at the bottom of the garden. 'That used to bother me,' she adds. 'But now I don't let things trouble me.' At dinner we eat in the dining room (where cookery classes also take place) and chat by the 'Quiet Zone' sign. 'I've had chemo and six cancer ops in 18 months,' reveals Annabel, who now has luminescent skin and a bounce in her step.

What of my health programme? I have detailed consultations with first-rate Ayurvedic and Naturopathic doctors – the latter every day – and excellent Ayurvedic treatments. I'm also given liver packs (to assist the release of toxins), reflexology, homeopathic powders ('constitutional medicine,' Dr Mathai explains) and daily group yoga and meditation.

Soon, I'm either 'OM'-ing, Downward Dog-ing, resting, sleeping or supine – having my naked and oiled body rubbed with hot pouches of cooked rice and herbs, or being massaged with medicated oils by two women so synchronized it's hard to believe it's not one therapist with four hands.

On day three, I fall ill with a fever and a hacking cough. 'Good, a healing crisis,' concludes Dr Mathai, 'Toxins leaving your body.' I sleep for 72 hours. Television is restricted to a communal area, 'so as not to hinder the healing

process,' as the brochure puts it. And the reading of depressing or stimulating literature is discouraged. The aim is to switch off totally.

After my resurrection, I try some activities. Apparently, stars and Captains of industry have been known to milk the cows or do gardening. Otherwise, there's an Indian Orthodox chapel in the grounds – Soukya is underpinned by Christian values, and even boasts its own chaplain cum counsellor – along with a two-kilometre walking track, bird-watching, an Ayurvedic medicinal herb garden (with 200 herbs) and the onsite production of medicated oils, where a man stirs (for days) a Harry Potter-esque cauldron of herbal concoctions.

I leave with a cough, but feeling balanced and reasonably positive, with Himalayan-crystal clear eyes, a 5.7 lb weight loss and a desire to continue with yoga and vegetarianism. I'd definitely return for the quality of its treatments and supportiveness of its staff. Back home, Dr Donnai checks my DNA. The Patulin has gone entirely, and the Copper complex reduced from 15 to just three ng/ml blood. If that sounds like double Dutch, it means that I've had a radical detox and health overhaul. It's official. 📌

Wellness stays at Soukya International Holistic Health Centre start at £2,800 a week, while medical stays start at £4,000 a week. [soukya.com](http://soukya.com)