

ESCAPE TO ATMANTAN

By Caroline Phillips



There are some unique boards by the roadside. 'A fit and healthy you is the best fashion statement you can make,' reads one sign. Another says, 'Be transformed — in the land of prana (life energy), there is no app for this.' Nearby folk wearing kurta pyjamas raise their hands prayerfully in Namaste greetings. This is the Atmantan wellness resort, the name of which is derived from the Sanskrit words for 'mind', 'body' and 'soul.'

Atmantan is a 90-minute drive from Pune in Maharashtra, India. It's nestled in the Sahyadri mountain range ('older than the Himalayas,' boasts the brochure, and also chokka with healing crystals, apparently) and overlooks the twinkling Mulshi Lake. The spa is surrounded by 40 manicured acres with red flame trees, bursts of blue and purple blooms, and a jungle's worth of orchestral birdsong. Plus, there are decorative driftwood elephants, serene Buddha statues and gardeners sweeping the grass. We're 2200 feet above sea level, where the air is as clear as eucalyptus, the mornings cool and the evenings pleasant.



Atmantan offers a 360-degree approach to health and fitness — encompassing everything from nutrition to spa therapies and functional fitness: from Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine and yoga to naturopathy (natural cures); from Western approaches (blood diagnostics, colonics) to physio (postural assessment and alignment). All under the care of six doctors, a tip-top team of therapists and a crack duo of physios.

There are nine retreat programmes, ranging from yoga to master cleanse, weight loss and restorative physiotherapy. (I'm trying a little of all of them). Most guests are encouraged to get active and there are fitness challenges, hiking, exercise from a vast array of classes, and personal training on offer. (One of the founders, Nikhil Kapur, is an Ironman tri-athlete).



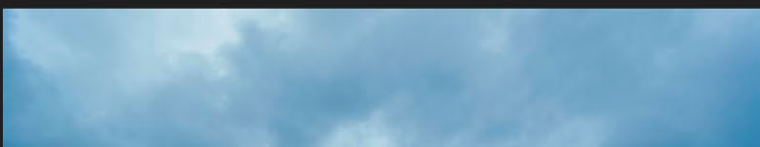
My bedroom is a golf-buggy ride away (the one and only vehicular trip that I take during the week) up the hill. Its decor is contemporary (with a super-high bedhead and bold rug) but there's no mistaking that I'm somewhere that takes health seriously: there's a mattress that's certified by the American Chiropractic Association, with a reinforced centre for spinal support; a pillow menu that includes orthopaedic ones; and a mini-bar only offering options like homemade muesli snacks and a seeds mix. My marble bathroom has chemical-free toiletries, a card indicating that there's a 'tongue scraper on request' and a sunken tub overlooking a picture window. (For the truly spoiling, there are two villas; one of 1500 sq. feet and the other 2500 sq. feet, and each with a private infinity pool, gym, sauna, steam, open-to-the-sky showers, and personal butler).

I make my way to lunch, noting that 'no bathrobes are permitted in the dining pavilion.' I pass massive bowls of fresh petal mosaics. There's a minimalist sweeping stone staircase down to the restaurant, Vistara — which means 'spectacular view,' and it is. And three other places to eat, including a tea and juice bar (that looks like a trendy Indian nightclub on a day off), barbeque lounge and 'outdoor kitchen.'



They're into locavarian fare (locally grown and seasonal, much of it from their 20-acre organic farm) and offer Mediterranean, Asian and Ayurvedic specialities. The Vistara menu gives calorie counts for the food and the items are also broken down into their nutritional composition. There's a choice of two dishes in each of the four courses. 'Green bean soup, 55 cal serving, 2.4g fat, 14.5g carbs' is one example. And raw okra salad and pan seared pomfret with bell pepper cheese patty and chickpea mash is another. (You do the calorie maths).

The doctors and chefs customise and modify food for guests, and I know this may be my last chance for a grande bouffe. But, despite myself, I take it slowly and moderately, eating mindfully whilst looking at the other guests. They're mostly Indian — a teeny bit of Bollywood, a large smattering of middle-class locals and one other white face. And what of the meal? The food is fine, the staff slick and professional, and the less said about the piped muzak the better.





Afterwards, I wander around the grounds. Nine months after the spa opened (in April 2016), there are 73 rooms that are operational and soon there will be 106. There's mini golf, croquet and a sports centre with table tennis and pool tables — a nod to the corporate groups they hope to attract. And a glorious amphitheatre with views over the hills and lake and sun, for doing yoga al fresco.

Then there's the eff-off spa. Truly. It has 23 treatment rooms, a spinning studio, a high tech gym, aerobic studio, indoor salt-water pool with water features, and yoga studio. Plus infrared sauna (with infrared light waves to induce sweat and the release of toxins, to support cellular health) and a hammam. Plus a water bar with bottles of H₂O, each infused with different herbs and vegetables.



Next I have an appointment with Dr. Manoj, an excellent naturopath and Ayurvedic consultant with a Masters in psychology; a man who is super well informed about health. Dr. Manoj prescribes a bespoke diet for me that includes chia and cacao smoothies, steamed veg and a daily small bowl of fresh ginger and garlic — the last a foul-tasting anti-inflammatory. After the lean diet, he moves me on to a juice one that I manage for a full...24 hours.

He also introduces me to the encyclopaedic spa menu: everything from a green tea body scrub and firming wrap of grapefruit and frankincense to vibration training with mechanical stimulation to exercise the body parts; from a Vichy shower with nine heads of water to massage the body to acupuncture and moxibustion. The list goes on. And on.



My week is soon filled with an (organic) jam-packed schedule. There's a visit to Dr. Navita for a detailed and illuminating physio examination and postural assessment. (She gives me exercises

and top tips for bunions and ergonomic seating.) Then there's floating yoga on the swimming pool (good for the core muscles) and Uduwarthanam (deep tissue massage using herbal powders, rather like warm sand being sprinkled on the skin and then being rubbed with fairly sandpaper, to help muscle stiffness and skin tone).

There's Takradhara (medicated buttermilk) being poured from a copper chatti bowl onto my head (enhances mood), Pranic healing (spiritual healing complete with energising of the chakras), Chi Nei Tsang (Chinese abdominal massage) and Ajna light therapy (a new technique stimulating the pineal gland with light and sounds....good for relaxation or, it's claimed, for inner eye meditation).



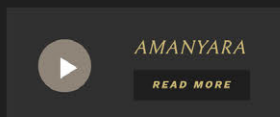
I love it all, particularly the yoga with Seema in the amphitheatre beneath the early morning moon. (I even manage Jal Neti [Ayurvedic nasal cleansing] with her and six other women in a communal bathroom used exclusively for this purpose). And then there's my hike up the mountain with Hemanta, personal trainer and national kickboxing champion — for muscle tone and stupendous views. And synchronised massages with therapists so good I want to take them home with me. The week passes in a blur of restorative therapies and I would have stayed another week, if I could.

I arrived at Atmantan with what's known as a 'corporate hunchback' i.e. a rounded spine — and depart feeling taller and straighter. My 'before' and 'after' statistics — such as my fat mass — on my body composition analyser print-out are much improved after just a week. I leave with more muscle, less cellulite and supple as ghee. As I drive away, I notice more roadside signs. 'Take care of yourself, you are living with you all your life,' instructs one. 'Breathe in this mountain air,' reads another, 'and boost your immune system.' And so I will and do.

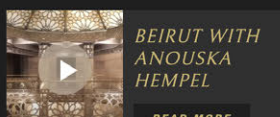
For further information, go to www.atmantan.com.

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites.

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