The New York Times
nytimes.com

August 13, 2006

In the Land of Four-Star Asceticism

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

SHE was Glinda in a sari. Early that morning, she had glided ethereally across the courtyard with her fellow healing goddesses, their feet bare, their flowing white garb edged in gold. The bird trills reverberated off the palace walls.

“Please sit,” she said prayerfully. Soon, thick warm sesame oil infused with medicinal herbs began to permeate my meager muslin thong. She breathed heavily, karate-chopping the oil with the edges of her hands. She gently pummeled me with poultices, hot bundles of herbs resembling bouquets garnis. In the background, I heard oil sizzling. I felt a strange compulsion to go fry myself in a wok.

There is a sign at the entrance to Kalari Kovilakom, the more than 150-year-old palace in the state of Kerala, India, now known as the Palace for Ayurveda, that says “Please Leave Your World Here.” But, having encountered elephants ambling along the highway from the airport, you already have. You have taken the Order, the humble oath of four-star asceticism. You have agreed to forsake all known forms of vacation decadence (rice gruel for dinner, anyone?), to give up meat, alcohol, caffeine, leather accessories, naps, sunbathing, swimming and mindless frivolity in order to purify and balance your whacked-out Western body and soul.

You are here to immerse yourself in ayurveda, the 3,500-year-old herb-based healing tradition that still flourishes in the daily life of India.

Within the palace’s teak-columned halls, with exquisite images of gods and goddesses carved into the ceiling, you are less tourist than nun. Your Patagonia clothes, bought at great expense in anticipation of premonsoon humidity and soaked in a toxic cocktail of insecticide as per your doctor’s instructions, have been exchanged for compulsory no-frills attire meant to relax the mind. These were whipped up overnight by a tailor who came to your room — garments, as one guest from London observed, “that made us look a bit like ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.’ ”

For pilgrims with deep pockets wanting an authentic immersion into this ancient medical system, including a radical purification and detoxification treatment known as pancha karma, the Kalari Kovilakom — which markets itself as combining “the indulgence of a palace with the austerity of an ashram” — is the real deal. Since the 1970’s, “ayurveda tourism” has drawn Lonely Planet acolytes and Rough Guiders, especially young Germans, to the thatched-hut beaches of southern India, lured by the promise of $5 massages.

But with the reimagining of this historic rajah’s palazzo by the Casino Group — Keralan hoteliers who have shrewdly rechristened themselves CHG Earth — the ante has been considerably upped.

Daybreak finds K. Narayayanan Nair, an ayurvedic chef whose first language is Malayalam, the native

language of Kerala, standing barefoot in the kitchen roasting chappatis over an open flame — a scene that would not be found at Canyon Ranch. His vessels are copper, stone and clay. “Aluminum can harm the nature of food,” he explained. “Very bad for stomach.”

The palace lies in “the land of the cloud-capped hills” in the remote Palakkad district against the Western Ghats, the otherworldly mountains bordering Tamil Nadu. Kalari Kovilakom is not exactly a hotel, not exactly a hospital and not exactly a spa, but a weird hybrid with a Mother Superior aura (in accordance with strict ayurvedic principles the establishment requires a minimum 14-day stay).

Along with more conventional upscale resorts like the Kumakarom Lake Resort, nestled in the backwaters south of Cochin, the historic outpost of spice traders on the Arabian Sea, the new ayurveda luxe taps into the country’s growing wave of medical tourism. But instead of a new kidney, ayurvedists — longevity-seekers who are already deeply into the present moment — come to Kerala to detoxify and purify with ayurvedic doctors, the new yogis, for whom mind, body and spirit have been fused for more than 3,000 years.

In 1887, the British administrator William Logan wrote of a native medical system in which the universe, including the human body, is formed by five great elements — space, air, fire, water and earth. Then, as now, Logan observed, ayurveda, which means “knowledge of life” in Sanskrit, was designed to “restore health and establish the digestive powers and likewise create intellectual brightness, personal beauty, acuteness of the senses, and prolongation of life.”

Ayurveda can be difficult to grasp for non-Indians, with hundreds of levels of practice, from learned to folk. It is part of the country’s medical system, with 2,100 ayurvedic hospitals, 196 medical colleges and a dozen major pharmaceutical companies. These join storefront village pharmacies overflowing with dusty medicine bottles and gnarled roots. Even the luxury-tourist experience ricochets wildly, from by-the-book, purer-than-thou abstinence worship to sybaritic resorts where a hit of ayurveda can be had before a poolside Pimms Cup.

Catatonic with jet lag, I arrived at Kalari Kovilakom as the first installment of a two-week trip to India in which I would dip in and out of Ayurveda World. Traveling solo, I chose Kerala not just for ayurveda, which has deep roots here, but also for its tropical cuisine, its history of progressive politics, its 91 percent literacy rate and, not the least, the sensuousness of a culture where even trucks are works of art.

Unlike my Kalari brethren, who were committed to at least two weeks of pancha karma — albeit without the more extreme purges involving induced vomiting and blood-letting with leeches — I was a fallen woman from the start. To supplement strange hot green decoctions of herbs sipped like tea, I secretly mainlined Peet’s coffee from San Francisco with a portable REI French press in my room, an unspeakable act of moral weakness that was ayurvedic suicide.

I hid this from Dr. Rudram Amma Sreelatha, one of two staff doctors, who had a hibiscus on her desk, as she began, as is customary, with a lengthy consultation to determine the elements, or doshas, of my native constitution — a process she refers to as “diagramming the person.”

“Are you tired or fresh when you wake up?” she asked with probing eyes.

“Do you remember your dreams?”

“What were your childhood diseases?”

“How is your sexual life?”

Then it was on to Raj Shekhar, the palace’s gifted yoga instructor.

“Do you prefer foods that are sweet, sour, salt, bitter or chilly?” he wanted to know.

“How is your thirst?”

“Have you had any traumas in childhood?”

Five years of therapy had suddenly collapsed into a single morning. And it wasn’t even lunchtime.

Ayurvedic doctors like Dr. Sreelatha diagnose illnesses and imbalances through darsana, observing the way a person moves, walks and behaves; sparsana, touching; and prasna, interrogating.

The big idea of ayurveda, said to have divine origin, is that health is a state of balance between body, mind and consciousness. Its sister discipline is yoga, which, before it became an industry, was also a science dating back to the Vedic period. One’s constitution is said to be composed of three doshas — vata (air), pitta (fire) and kapha (water) — encoded in every cell. Initial treatment includes a prescribed diet (supplemented with herbs both ingested and applied), yoga, meditation and massages to prepare the body for elimination of agni, or waste. Pancha karma, a specialty of Kerala and no stroll through the park, includes a stamina-challenging sequence of enemas.

“We are not treating part by part and organ by organ,” Dr. Sreelatha explained kindly. “We consider the body and soul.”

Soon I found myself spread-eagled in a muslin loincloth as the beatific 24-year-old Sreeni Gopi lit a candle, said a prayer and anointed the crown of my head with sandalwood paste. With another therapist — there are usually two or more — she began kalari uzhichil, a massage that harks back to kalari payattu, the traditional Keralan martial art that once flourished at the palace and employed ayurveda for optimum health.

On a table shaped vaguely like a human being, hollowed slightly to capture oil, my spine was a cobra unfurling. Then Ms. Gopi led me to what appeared to be a gigantic cabinet, actually an herbal steam bath. Sweat mingled with oil as I sat in a Victrola cabinet of steam.

My vata imbalance — sapping my creativity and “native pitta fire” — melted away under ladlefuls of warm water mixed with green gram, a slightly exfoliating lentil. The goddess, in the act of bathing, had returned me to an infant state.

Mornings unfolded simply, with music from nearby Hindu temples the reveille of India. Yoga began in a deeply shaded sanctum; the heat seemed almost a living being. Breakfast, a steamed rice-flour pancake with a plantain cooked with coconut and brown sugar, arrived ceremoniously on a brass tray, eaten, as is traditional, with the hands. Afterward guests (or were we patients?) drifted maharajah-like across marble

floors, polished and fragrant with lemon grass oil.

“It’s not Mauritius or Bali,” observed Patrice Gilbert, a Parisian pharmacist who was completing two weeks of pancha karma with his wife with a farewell dinner of artfully prepared gruel. “It’s a treatment. The most important thing is the quiet, because you are inquiring within yourself. It’s a silent release.”

Allergic either to oil or austerity I promptly broke out in a rash. But Kerala was filled with ardent ayurvedists.

There was Sue Muir, a 54-year-old headhunter from Warwickshire, England, who was seeking relief from asthma and found it with nasal inhalation treatments and “very expensive pummeling.” There was Florence d’Hauterive, a Parisian 50-something human resources executive, who has been to Kerala six times for ayurveda simply to unwind (“I’m not an ashram-type person,” she said of the voluntary severity of a hotel similar to Kalari Kovilakom. “I got so depressed I almost ran away”).

And there was Dr. Irfan Sheikh, an Indian-born English pediatrician who, frustrated by the inability of Western medicine — known in India as “English” or “allopathic” medicine — to address chronic pain, began incorporating both acupuncture and ayurveda in his practice. He was in Kerala having ayurvedic treatments to “kick start” his own immune system after cancer surgery, radiation and chemotherapy. “They offered me anti-depressants,” he said of his Western colleagues. “But I wasn’t depressed.”

In India, and especially Kerala, a relatively rural state with a tropical climate that makes love to practically anything that grows, ayurveda is part of the warp and weft of daily life. When babies are born, their first foods are rice and green gram, known for balancing all three doshas. Spices in the Indian larder, including tumeric, cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger and cardamom, all have medicinal properties. In earlier days, mothers and grandmothers made oil for different kinds of ailments from ghee, coconut and sesame, and even Bangalore tech execs still routinely apply oil to the head before work.

In monsoon season, many Indians go for a “tune up,” when the air is humid and the skin is thought to be more permeable. “Whenever your mother said, ‘this is good for this’ and ‘that is good for that’ she was teaching you ayurveda,” said Joseph T. Joseph, the manager of Kalari Kovilakom, which has a special kitchen for herb preparation.

IN Aranmula, a picturesque hamlet on the Pamba River, Dr. Hari Kumar Bhasker runs the NSS Ayurveda Hospital, where a portrait of Lord Dhanvantari, the physician of the gods, hangs in the entrance hall. Outside are demonstration gardens lush with ayurvedic plants — holy basil (for fever, skin lesions); brahmi (memory); ashoka trees (mental acuity), Indian gooseberry (an anti-oxidant). He has received financing from the United Nations and the Indian government to conserve and cultivate medicinal plants.

At the Vijnana Kala Vedi Cultural Center in Aranmula, an innovative school dedicated to Keralan traditional arts, including dance and mural painting, Dr. Bhasker teaches a three-week “Ayurveda 101” to students like Kim Berley, a 28-year-old Sacramento waitress, who is convinced that ayurveda is the next yoga — “a way of balancing yourself with your own body and the elements around you,” she said.

Students learn about rejuvenative marmalades and how to prepare decoctions. “In Ayurveda, our medicines aren’t made in glass-walled laboratories with air conditioning,” Dr. Bhasker said in the hospital’s

dispensary, pointing out bottles of nerve tonic. “We cook our medicines. There are no standard protocols. It’s intuitive on the part of the doctor.”

Many Indians combine allopathic medicine and ayurveda, going to an “English” doctor for serious illnesses and to an ayurvedic practitioner for arthritis, hypertension and other chronic conditions. But the lack of standardization is one reason why ayurvedic doctors are not allowed to practice medicine in the United States. (Instead, popularized by Deepak Chopra and the Whole Body aisle of Whole Foods, it has largely assumed a day-spa persona.)

With ayurveda tourism booming, the Keralan government has been working to regulate and rate ayurvedic resorts, so the creed is not diluted by unscrupulous operators without professional training. Traditionally, ayurvedic medicine was passed down from father to son, uncle to nephew, but now it is professionalized, with physicians like Dr. Sreelatha earning advanced degrees from five-year ayurvedic medical schools.

But some purists take a dim view of ayurveda tourism all together. “They are doing the safest things, with very little medicinal value,” said Dr. C. K. Krishnan Nair, an associate professor at the Government Ayurveda College in Tripunithura. “They make money. It’s that simple.”

On the way to Kumarakom Lake Resort, accompanied by George Joseph, an astute cultural observer and steely-nerved driver, we passed women with jasmine garlands in their hair, open-air trucks bursting with warty brown jackfruit, markets where men balanced green bundles of curry leaves on their heads, their aromatic trail hanging in the moist air. By a narrow bridge we saw a road sign I took to heart. “Hurry Causes Worry,” it said.

The resort is situated on the backwaters, a languorous tropical labyrinth of lakes, lagoons and shady channels brimming with village life, navigable by dugout canoe or traditional Keralan longboat, called a kettu vallam. Kumarakom Lake mixes no-nonsense ayurveda and palm-fringed restaurants with piped-in Glen Campbell and Kingfisher beer. Fishermen drift past in dugout canoes propelled by poles. The contrasts that make India India are here in abundance.

Like Kalari Kovilakom, Ayurmana at Kumarakom Lake plays up its historic pedigree: its “heritage” building, which was moved to the resort from its original location, is said to be the ancestral home of renowned ayurvedic practitioners. Exhibited in the open-air courtyard, Japanese in its simplicity, is hallowed ayurvediana, including ancient clay vessels storing medicated ghee.

I actually had a vision of Dick Cheney when I finally experienced sirodhara, a signature ayurvedic treatment that Dr. Sreelatha and others had cautioned could lead to emotional melt-down. Warm oil is released above you in a steady pendulum stream, your forehead a windshield and the oil, the wiper.

Feelings of deep panic were eventually supplanted by one of utter defenselessness in which, I was certain, all dark information about my past could be gleaned. Sirodhara struck me as an immensely powerful tool for extracting secrets.

I spent my last day in India at an open-air market in Cochin, marveling at snake gourds and silvery barracudas for sale. For some reason — maybe the heat and dust — after feeling buoyant the entire trip, I almost fainted, transformed into one of those Halloween masks in which the eyes pop out of their sockets.

Weak and woozy, I made my way to Ernakulam, to the branch there of India's most celebrated ayurvedic hospital and health clinic network, Arya Vaidya Sala Kottakkal.

The doctor on call, V. K. Vinod Kumar, who was barefoot, took my blood pressure and pronounced it low. He told me to lay off masala and oily food. He said I needed more sleep. He wrote me two prescriptions.

As a final suggestion, he recommended that in the summer season, I have sex once every 15 days, and in the winter, every 3 days — at least.

I left India reinvigorated, with a lighter heart. I was dreaming of December.

VISITOR INFORMATION

WHEN TO GO

Though not ideal from a tourist's standpoint, Keralans regard the summer monsoons as the best season for ayurveda, when the skin is tender and herb leaves are fresh and new. The months preceding the monsoons, which break in June, are uncomfortably hot. November through March is considered peak tourist season, priced accordingly.

HOW TO GET THERE

To fly into Cochin Airport in Kerala, or Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu (convenient to Palakkad district) requires changing planes in Mumbai, New Delhi or Bangalore. You can also fly to Trivandrum, the Keralan capital. Within India, Jet Airways is a pleasure — reliable with fantastic food.

WHERE TO STAY

Kalari Kovilakom: The Palace for Ayurveda, Palakkad. Minimum stay is 14 days; from about $5,000, including meals, treatments, airport pickup, yoga and requisite ayurvedic garb; (91-4923-263737 or 263155; www.cghearth.com).

Kumarakom Lake Resort, Backwaters. Room rates for doubles range from $250 to $650 plus tax through September, higher beginning in October; ayurvedic treatments extra; packages available; (91-481-2524900 or 2524501 or 2525431; www.klresort.com).

Vijnana Kala Vedi Cultural Center, Aranmula. The center, which attracts mostly the young bumming-around-India crowd, provides a rare immersion into Keralan culture, including Hindi and Malayalam classes, cooking, kolams (auspicious designs made with colored powders) and ayurveda. The village is walkable, untouristed and charming; vegetarian cuisine served on banana leaves. Rates vary; (91-468-2310451 or 2214483; www.vijnanakalavedi.org).

INFORMATION

The government ayurveda Web site is a great resource (indianmedicine.nic.in/html/ayurveda/afmain.htm).

I got excellent guidance from Clipper Holidays in Cochin (91-484-2303968 or 2306468 or 3293968; www.clipperholidays.co.in) and Ellison Poe at Poe Travel in Little Rock (800-727-1960;

www.poetravel.com).

PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN writes for The New York Times from San Francisco.