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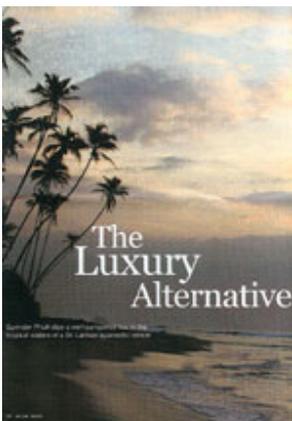
The Luxury Alternative

Surinder Phull dips a well – pampered toe in the tropical waters of a Sri Lankan Ayurvedic retreat.



My underlying fear as I set out to find an alternative health holiday was committing to a monastic regime of dawn meditation session, singing lessons and a raw food diet. Don't get me wrong, yoga good health and nutrition are passions of mine but spending precious free time working through a tightly packed schedule of chanting, art and crafts and vegan cookery classes, just isn't my cup of herbal tea. Call me a conventional but I still think that holidays are about enjoying the sunshine, letting your hair down maybe trying a bit of local cuisine and not scheduling your relaxation into 30 minute mediation slot. Yet every brochure, website or advert I seemed to look at told the same old story, a two week, all inclusive week packages at camp alternative could not offer me freedom, relaxation or even cultural insight. No, it became all too clear – I was being sold nothing more than buntings with brown rice.

Determined to find a destination where saluting the sun was not part of a military drill, I embarked on a tedious trawl through health websites and search engines. Finally I found what seemed like my dream destination, the Barberyn reef resort in Sri Lanka. This was a bit further than I had planned for a seven day trip but images of guests being submerged in herbal baths, tropical fruits and hot oil massages were simply too much to resist.



The real deal

Situated on Sri Lanka's south west coast, Barberyn is a family run retreat and the first Ayurvedic resort to be established in Sri Lanka. Its mission is to give guests a genuine taste of this traditional system of medicine through a combination of nutrition, personalized Ayurvedic health care and yoga. With a tropical climate and stunning coastline thrown into the package it seemed like my idea of alternative health heaven. So, fully armed with a yoga mat, sunhat and a range of stomach remedies it was off to Sri Lanka just as fast as my little flip - flopped feet would take me.

Cool haven

After a few hours of delay, an eight –hour flight and a two hour bus journey I arrived at Barberyn with more inclination to flop than flip but views of the coastline, aromatic spices ,and offerings of papaya juice were just enough to revive me . The resort is a careful orchestration of palm trees, decking and tasteful wooden sun loungers, all creating a cool haven from the tropical heat. Sinewy young Sri Lankan women scuttle around the place fishing their brilliant white teeth as the pass you, occasionally whisking someone off for a rub, scrub or to try an Ayurvedic steaming session. It wasn't long before I myself was offered my own first taste of Ayurveda-quite literally in fact as my stomach lured me to the lunch buffet. An array of autumnal colored rice, delicately spiced vegetables, beans, lentils, chutney and coconut sauces were all mine to choose from. Small labels explained the nutritional benefit of foods turning lunch into a virtuous, as well as mouth watering culinary experience.

Of course, the principle of Ayurvedic nutrition is not to pile as many different dishes on to your plate in an all-you-can e-eat-buffet style. As I discovered in my personal consultation with the Ayurvedic doctor, individuals are advised to avoid certain foods according to their constitutional type, family history and general health. The doctor took my blood pressure, pulse and asked a host of general and medical questions before making my diagnosis. I was in pretty good health and it turned out that certain citrus fruits were the only thing I needed to steer clear of-definitely a relief when honey and curd pudding beckoned me the following lunchtime. I was also advised to eat plenty of spicy foods for my low blood pressure. For a self confessed chili addict this was a problem-in fact none of the recommendations seemed very problematic at all; daily massages, herbal baths, steam inhalations and a few herbal tonics were part of the prescription. Just what the doctor ordered!



Pure relaxation

My first massage took place in a cool dark room where a pungent mixture of special oils was warmed and blended by a girl with waist length jet black hair. I lay on my front as her tiny hands worked the warm oil into knots in my shoulders but was immediately surprised to feel another set of nimble fingers working on my lower back. A second masseuse had surreptitiously entered the room and the two girls began to rub, knead and maneuvered my body in perfect unison. The synchronicity of their movements was incredible, creating the sensations of a fantastic four limbed creature working only spine. Although visions of octopus ladies were slightly disconcerting to begin with I was soon sent into a well-deserved siesta, A gentle awakening from my slumber and I was taken to a herbal bath, steam room and then given some time to lie down and relax –phew- and after that lot boy did I need it.



Stretch out

But relaxation is the name of the game at Barberyn. Those who chose could have just spend the whole stay being gloriously pampered. But guests were also encouraged to take at least some gentle exercise and inclusive of yoga classes were on offer. Sessions took place on the roof terrace with stunning view of sea of coastline and teacher. Oma shandri was certainly an inspirational figure. “ I am 74 years old and I only began yoga when I was fifty”. She explained to his new group. I began to practice because I had been suffering with chronic osteoarthritis, she continued “sometimes the pain is terrible but I know without yoga I would certainly be in a wheelchair today. “there was a silent disbelief as the comfortably cross legged woman faced the group stretched out her sinewy limbs and then reestablished herself in a lotus position. Her back was erect, eyes bright and she could have been 25 years younger than she claimed. Her class was fairly challenging but her mantra” any one can do what I do left a class full of hopeful fantasies of themselves contorted into incredible backbends and doing daily hour long headstands.

Evenings at Barberyn are about –you guessed it –relaxing, eating in the restaurant and comparing treatments with the other guests. Although local excursions were available to encourage us to venture beyond the resort, a holiday at Barberyn is not for those who want to immerse themselves in the Sri Lankan culture. Guests are mainly European and brushing up on your German is probably more useful than learning Sinhalese. Yet after a week at Barberyn, I felt refreshed, relaxed and ready to put at least some of my Ayurvedic wisdom into practice. This was an alternative health holiday but one for hippie who are partial to a little bit of luxury. And so on last evening I packed my bags happily in the knowledge that my yoga mat, bikini and sarong had been used everyday and the packet of tummy settlers were still unopened- now that is my idea of a perfect holiday.