



Ancient Stories of Ayurveda

Steeped in years of Ayurvedic tradition, Barbery Reef Resort is the ultimate Sri Lankan retreat, writes **Anji Bignell**.

Sri Lanka's rich tapestry of history and culture is deeply woven into Ayurvedic medicine – from the specified diets to the ancient body treatments that retain over 5000 years of knowledge. Ayurveda is made up of the five elements (earth, water, fire, space and air) and in the human body these elements come together in specific permutations within a combination of the three doshas (vata, pitta and kapha) and is a comprehensive and holistic approach to healthy living.

Barbery Reef Resort has over 25 years of experience with Ayurvedic medicine and are the founders of the first ever Ayurvedic resort, with each treatment and daily meal specifically tailored to the body type diagnosed at first consultation with their qualified in-house doctors.

Upon arrival at the retreat after my 13-hour flight, I am greeted with a wall of humidity at Colombo, and the hustle and bustle of the airport, only to be whisked off by my driver and taken to the resort that lies on the south-west coast of Sri Lanka, some 85 km south of Colombo International Airport. As I walk into the quiet, sleepy resort (an early-morning stillness has set over the whole of the town of Beruwala), I am given a welcome drink and pack and taken to my expansive room overlooking the beach. Sleep was deep as I lay beneath my mosquito net, feeling the quiet content of the waves crashing down below and in the knowledge that I was to explore the wonderful world of ancient Ayurveda for the next five days.

Day one

I arose early to a breakfast of green soup, roti, red lentils and a variety of tropical fruits and then took a stroll along the open stretch of beach hugging the walls of the resort. I stumbled upon the occasional local, traveller and stray dog playing in the sand. There were islands hovering above



Personal consultation

the early-morning fog across the way and boats taking tourists out to visit the temple and surrounding islands.

Afterwards, I was due for my visit with the doctor in the clinic, who checked my pulse for vital signs (with three fingers for the three doshas).

His conclusion was that I was clearly stressed and fatigued (no doubt jetlagged), there was some tension in my shoulders and that I put weight on the areas of my stomach and hips (to which I asked how he knew and he laughed and said, "I can see it!"). A schedule was then created for the next three days of treatments (until my next consultation), with meal plans specific to my table and room number.

MY PERSONALISED TREATMENTS:

- Sarvanga Abhyanga massage with herbal oils
- Herbal garden for an Ekanga Pichu treatment of medicated oil patches placed on various parts of the body for detoxifying and weight loss
- A papaya face mask and cucumbers placed on the face and eyes
- Steam room
- Powder massage
- Shower with an oil scrub and hot Avagaaha herbal bath as someone pours water all over the body and back
- Acupuncture for the head, hands and ankles.



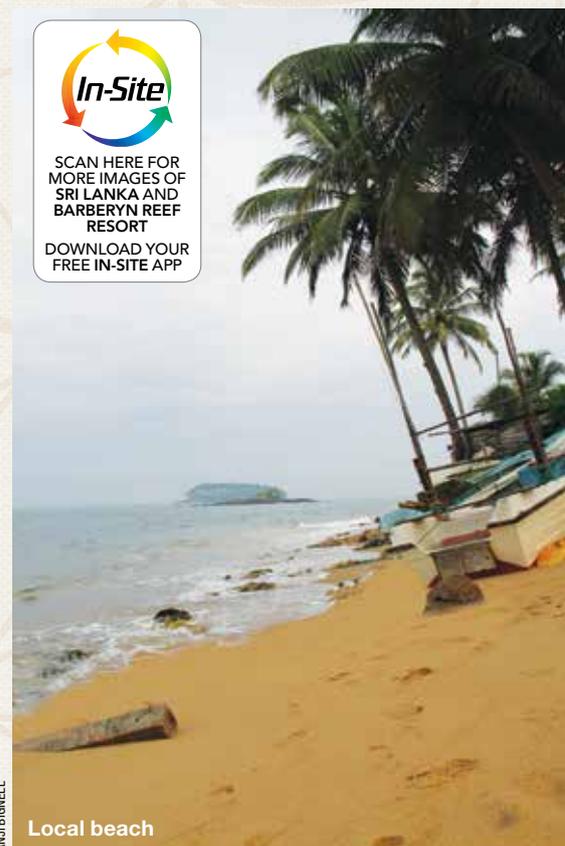
Prescribed medicine by room number



Lunch buffet



Dinner time entertainment



Local beach

The food is a very important aspect of traditional Ayurveda medicine and as I arrive for lunch, I am given an extensive buffet to choose from inclusive of all the six main tastes (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent and astringent), with carefully labelled pots of beautiful vegetarian, cooling salads and vegetables (such as snake gourd, specifically tailored to pitta body types; my main body type) and steamed fish.

Barberyn has two areas where they grow organic herbs and fresh vegetables and fruit: 50 acres at Batakanda, and Dedduwa, a riverine island. Most of the green vegetables served are from these two places, which makes the food fresh and tasty.

My first treatment for today was to check in for some acupuncture then a Shiro Abhyanga head massage. The sheet is dropped in front of the mirror and I am staring at my naked self (from the top down) being massaged with oil – a foreign concept for people in Western cultures if you have only experienced traditional sports and remedial massages. It can be quite confronting until it is simply accepted as normal practice. I am then led to the table where a musky-smelling herbal oil is massaged into the face, an incredibly relaxing experience. It truly is a wonderful treat to have someone massage

your face and give it the kind of love and attention it deserves!

After a deeply relaxing two-person synchronised full-body Abhyanga massage, I continue my treatments in the herbal garden where Ekanga Pichu is performed.

The sound of the thunder rolled over the sky and the rain settled in for the warm afternoon shower as I moved from the herbal garden to be bathed in a hot herbal Avagaaha bath like a baby. It made me aware of the water theme in the treatment, and in particular,



Abhyanga massage

soothing to the fiery pitta body type. In traditional cultures the world over, water represents the energetic flow of life and purification – from Chinese feng shui to the traditional beliefs of the North American Cherokee Indians, it is used in some form of ritual or another. For myself, the water dripping between my toes, the warm drops of rain filling the ponds and the waves crashing against the beach had an emotional effect on my body so deep that sappy tears started trickling down my cheeks – this just brought home to me exactly what had been missing in my life. Sometimes you don't know what it is until you have it and then it's taken away.

Around 3pm I pick my medicine up from my specific box next to the treatment rooms with timely instructions for herbal pills and drinks to be consumed throughout the day. Everything appears to be written in German as well as English; the majority of visitors to the resort come from Germany or Europe.

“When Barberyn decided to introduce Ayurveda as an offering back in 1984, it was the German people who were ready to embrace it,” says the resort's owner, Geetha Karandawala.

“I guess Germany was ahead of the curve when it came to preventative health and also women's health.”



Barberyn pool

Which made me think it was time that the rest of the world caught up and embraced this tradition.

Day two

I go for a walk along the waterfront and then indulge in a breakfast of cooling foods such as cucumber, mango juice, some green beans, coconut sambol, hommus and lentils. I quite enjoy the stringent, bitter and salty tastes with a hint of sweetness with the taste within each morsel. Each type of dish has a unique, pungent flavour and scent that invigorates my palate again. For so long I had been dousing my taste buds with the overindulgent flavours of Westernised food that it has forgotten how the taste and smell should reach every corner of the tongue and nostrils... it was a sensory overload.

I continue my treatments like the day before, and then float back to my room to drink cups of herbal tea and write, a most blissful experience as I listen to the bleeping noises of the resident squirrels nearby and the hum of the fan above my head. Then it's off for my yoga class in the yoga hall, then dinner and bed.

Day three

I am awake by 4am then fall back asleep until 5.30am. This is the earliest I've risen for a long time, but it's warm outside and the long stretch of sand with its teasing waves beckons me to come walk along it. After my walk (and my usual banter with the locals) I head for my treatments; however, this time I am taken to the steam room where herbal leaves and herbs grown and picked from the Barberyn garden are boiled and the

medicated vapours are passed through to the steam chamber where I lay down – with my head jutting out as if Houdini were about to saw me in half in one of his magical tricks – only to come out in one sweaty piece and taken to the herbal garden for my next treatments.

After my lunch of soup, lentils and coconut cake, I have been booked in for a foot massage in the resort beauty salon, where the girls giggle away and chat to each other while massaging my overworked tootsies. Their shining smiles and addictive laughs have me giggling uncontrollably. None of us can understand what each other is saying but the giggling sets us off again until my stomach is sore and my feet are in a state of catatonic bliss. For the rest of my stay, I get used to my daily ritual of walking past the salon and making eye contact with the girls and giggling.

My evening consists of some meditation in the yoga hall, where an experienced teacher explains Buddhist philosophy and conducts a wonderfully soothing meditation class and blesses us at the end. I come out feeling lighter than ever.

Day Four

I am beginning to smell like roses – literally. My trip to the markets and the herbal store with my tuk tuk driver has left me heavy-handed with potions and lotions of pure sandalwood, almond and rose oil plus Sri Lankan Ceylon tea (which has become my new coffee fix). I am amazed at the wonderful array of produce that is available at the markets – everything from dried fish (even dried lobster!) to endless varieties of fruits, vegetables and my favourite Sri Lankan

sugar, which comes in its natural state of sweet, sticky brown blocks. I've been having this with my black tea in the afternoon and I almost want to take some home with me but fear that may not sit well with customs.

The local people don't mind their photos being taken either and even offer me food as I walk the market stalls. It felt wonderful to not be one of the infinite masses of white, fleshy tourists that have infiltrated other, more touristy destinations like Thailand and India – almost an anomaly in this burgeoning holiday mecca.

I head back to the resort and rest in my room and practise some yoga, then it is off to dinner and for a very early night.

Day five

It is my last day of treatment and one week too short in my opinion. Most people stay two weeks to a month and see significant results with their health and weight loss. Even after four full days of treatment, I feel amazing and my skin *glows*. I've also had time to see the doctor, who gives me a month's worth of medicine to take home with me to Australia and extra information and recipes for my pitta body type. It is understandable why people return every year to Barberyn. This place is intriguing and beautiful at the same time – like a secret that lies far below the surface and remains untangible but leaves you wanting more. I will be returning next year and I hope you will too. **NH**

For a truly authentic Ayurvedic experience visit barberynresorts.com/english/reef