

The Nation Newspaper, Spetembr 14,2002

In the Explore section on Wholesome Healing

Normally a focus point for meditation practice, the third eye is where warm medicated oils are poured in the ancient Ayurvedic healing treatment called Shirodara.

There I was, lying half naked on a wooden massage table at the Barberyn Reef Ayurvedic Resort in Sri Lanka, with a continuous stream of heated oil drooling from a clay pot, directly onto my third eye. The oil was gently massaged into my scalp and neck as I wafted into a languorous stupor.

This treatment had been prescribed to me as part of a week-long therapy of detoxification and stress relief by the Ayurvedic doctors at Barberyn Reef.

I'd arrived at the resort as tense as a ticking time-bomb. But after a week of daily oil massages, herbal baths, herbal medicines and a regimen of Ayurvedic vegetarian cuisine including the daily Gotukala soup prescribed for stress relief, I gradually found myself being open with people. I was even hugging fellow guests by the time I left.

Although this ancient holistic healing system has been in practice for more than 5,000- years and is known to have its origins in India, Ayurveda remains an unfamiliar science to modern day consumers, partly due to its esoteric philosophy, complex therapies and intricate blend of herbal medical concoctions.

Translated as the "science of life", Ayurvedic medicine is based on the theory that our bodies are categorised into three biological humours, or doshas. Illnesses from which we may suffer are the effects of imbalances in these doshas. The three doshas are the Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. Each individual possesses a unique makeup of these energies. Thus while two people may have the same illness, the sources of their illnesses will differ depending on their different dosha constitutions. The Ayurvedic physician diagnoses and prescribes a different treatment for each person, based on the dosha that is causing the illness.

Ayurvedic treatment seeks not just to cure the symptoms, but to balance the physical and mental aspects through a system of herbal therapies, oil massages, diet, yoga and meditation.

Like much of Indian culture, the key theories and practices of Ayurveda were transported to its neighbors - Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand -in the second and third centuries by monks who migrated overseas to spread the teachings of Buddha. Since monks were also the healing practitioners of those times, they also dispensed medical knowledge.

It may come as a surprise to today's spa-goers that many of the healing treatments used in Thai spas today, such as heated herbal compresses, baths and therapies, are derived from Ayurveda. Even certain techniques of traditional Thai massage can trace their origins to the stretching poses of yoga.

That's why many have a certain sense of familiarity when undergoing some of the heat-based treatments at the Barberyn Ayurvedic Health Centre. But where the centre differs from the spas found in Thailand is the lack of cosmetic dressing - the floating blossoms, scented candles and other mood-enhancing paraphernalia that add a sense of luxury at many typical spas. At Barberyn Reef, the treatments are not about pampering. The focus is on healing.

The Ayurvedic Health Centre is located in a building housing consultation rooms for the in-house Ayurvedic doctors, treatment rooms, a pharmacy where the herbal medicines are freshly concocted every morning, and a dispensary where guests pick up their daily doses of tonics and powders.

While Ayurvedic resorts are commonly found on India's lush and romantic Kerala coast, Sri Lanka is not a place that triggers thoughts of these healing resorts, though the gentle island nation has been practising this holistic science for centuries. It also offers serious, professional Ayurvedic healing resorts that provide an easier alternative to travellers who shy away from the rigours usually associated with voyaging in its bigger and bossier northern neighbour.

It is this easier way of life that led Michiko and Sachiko, two young Japanese women, to Barbelyn Reef. Over steaming cups of home-grown black tea during a sightseeing trip into the picture-postcard country side, the two friends tell me in halting English how for four years they had dreamed of staying in an authentic Indian Ayurvedic resort. But the recent military tensions between Pakistan and India had scared them off. Through a Japanese website, they had stumbled on Sri Lanka as an alternative Ayurvedic resort destination. They had even quit their jobs at a Tokyo hotel to spend a month at the resort, and were well on the road to good health, judging from the startling intensity of their suntans.

The guests, mostly from Europe, 'where Ayurveda seems to enjoy a better following than it does in America or east Asian countries, come to Barbelyn Reef for a variety of reasons. Some seek relief for serious medical ailments such as diabetes, eczema, psoriasis, respiratory or obesity problems for which Ayurveda offers real cures. Others come simply to de-stress and detox in an exotic beach setting. But what-ever their reasons and backgrounds, they share the common objective of a return to wellness through Ayurvedic healing.

the insistence of her mother, longtime Barbelyn customer. Weighing in at a distressing 90 kgs when she arrived, Kate ended up staying well beyond her intended three weeks. She left three months later and 22 kg lighter amid a tearful send-off at the hotel entrance. For Kate, an important psychological and spiritual change had also taken place in those months at the resort.

"When I was overweight, I couldn't accept that it was really me inside that big body. I could never look at my body in the mirror - I would only see my face, not the rest of me. After three months here, taking the prescribed herbal treatments, learning how to eat differently, practising yoga and meditation, I have a new sense of emotional and physical balance that helps me control the eating disorder that led me to gain all that weight in the first place. I learned how to make the mind body connection," she explains, seated cross-legged on the antique Dutch colonial settee in the lobby.

"There's also an incredibly supportive environment at the resort. Knowing that there are in-house doctors and staff in the dining room who care about what you eat and you to heal yourself."

Kate speaks in the hushed tones that many guests seem to adopt after an extended stay at the resort. Lulled by the rhythmic pounding of the Indian Ocean nearby, relaxed by the kneading of daily oil massages, long-staying guests eventually emanate an aura of well-

being, signalled by slower speech and a softer demeanour. No wonder many of the guests end up rescheduling flights and extending their stays.

"There is something unusual about the geographic location as well," she adds. "There's a particular energy that comes from this piece of land, the beach and the sea. It's a sort of rejuvenating aura."

The resort's founder, Sudana Roderigo, may have sensed the same vibes when he bought this strip of beach in 1968.

"I remember my father taking us through what was then a messy jungle to show us this piece of beach he'd just bought to build his dream of an Ayurvedic healing resort," recalls Geetha Karandawala, one of resort's owners, and now a lawyer working for the United Nations in Bangkok. "Three decades ago, there were hardly any hotels on the island's southwestern coast, and the concept of destination spas didn't even exist.

"I remember standing on that beach with him, thinking : `What a fine line there is between insanity and brilliance."

Thirty-four years later, the resort continues to thrive, having built a reputation and a loyal following of return guests purely through word of mouth. Recognised as the pioneer of Ayurvedic healing resorts, it is also known as the most authentic Ayurvedic resort hotel in Sri Lanka, in a league of its own compared to fake Ayurvedic spas" that offer no more than herbal oil massages that have begun to mushroom lately. It's rumoured that the trend in so-called Ayurvedic spas may sprout in Thailand soon, spawned by avaricious businessmen looking for a new marketing gimmick for 'the current spa craze, but with no real knowledge of Ayurveda. Authentic Ayurvedic healing takes more than a few oil massages. It's the total integration of individual diagnosis, daily traditional treatments by trained professionals, the correct diet, and the proper herbal medications, that provide a holistic lifestyle that's best experienced in a dedicated environment. It certainly helps when this environment is an idyllic beach setting. Currently, a second place, called Barberyn Beach Ayurvedic Resort is being developed further south on Welligama Beach and is scheduled to open at the end of this year.

Set on a hillside sloping down to the beach, the new hotel rooms will offer a panoramic view of the sea. In keeping with its dedication to healing, the new resort will be the first of its kind to offer wheelchair access throughout the property.

Chami Jotisalikom is the author of The Thai Spa Book, The Natural Asian Way to Health to be released in October.