

TRAVELLING WITH HOPE

There's no better way to recharge and develop our inner selves than against the backdrop of a healing, exotic destination, claims **Mala Barua**, founder of Mystic-Asia, a Delhi-based company that specializes in spiritual retreats.

A beautiful man I recently met asked me how I enjoyed being in the business of "hope management." "What's that?" I asked. I had never heard of it. Why would he think I was in something I'd never heard of before? "Hope management," he explained, "is a newly coined term for holistic wellness." He said we gave people hope. Hope for better health, hope for less stress, hope for peace of mind!

I had heard of health tourism being the new buzzword in the travel industry. Health spas were mushrooming all over the world. People were choosing wellness over sightseeing holidays.

They needed to de-stress from a hectic lifestyle full of deadlines and targets. Yoga, Ayurveda, seaweed wraps, Lomi Lomi massages, fish therapy and so on, were suddenly all the rage. Which once again brings us to the question, what *is* hope management? Hope management takes it just one step further. It not only encompasses your physical health but also addresses your mind, body and soul. Few people understand that focussing on and improving one aspect of yourself, automatically improves the others.

Recently I was having dinner with a Norwegian participant who had attended one of my retreats 10 years ago. She had made a scrapbook of

everything that she learnt in the hills of Kasauli. Self reflection notes, colour therapy drawings, and even some pine needles from the forest. She still refers to these notes in her times of reflection. It really touched me to see how much this learning meant to her.

I guess my intention with Mystic-Asia was right on target. I wanted people not only to do yoga asanas but to benefit internally through a deeper understanding of what effect it can have on their body and mind. It was not enough to just take people on pilgrimages or invite them to yoga retreats. I had to combine travel with an added value of learning how to change and improve their lifestyles. I wanted them to truly develop their inner selves. What better way than taking them away from the humdrum of everyday life—to an exotic destination and spa—so they can pay full attention to themselves, without a care in the world?

When Ananda in the Himalayas invited me to host my first retreat, I gladly accepted. Beautifully set in the foothills of the Himalayan mountain range, this palace-turned-destination spa has the grace and charm that takes one completely away from the buzz of city life. Specializing in Ayurveda, Ananda provided the perfect platform for us to hold a seven-day retreat to give a deeper understanding of this ancient philosophy. While our Ayurvedic master taught us how to harmonize the five elements in our bodies with the five elements in our environment, the extensive spa at Ananda pampered us with amazing treatments. My foremost retreat was an eye-opener—I saw that a wellness programme like this had a profound impact on the participants. And henceforth, they were committed to changing their lives for the better—and this was a big victory for me.

This retreat led to others in Coconut Lagoon in Kerala, Clouds End in Kasauli, Quiet in Pondicherry, and Fort Tiracol

in Goa. Soon we had invitations from neighbouring countries such as Bhutan, Bali, The Philippines, Mauritius, and the Maldives. The idea had caught on.

So far, two of my personal favourite destinations have been a mindfulness meditation retreat set in the backdrop of the mountains in Bhutan, and a complete detox retreat in The Farm in The Philippines.

Amanresorts, our host in Bhutan, took us through four of their lodges in Thimphu, Paro, Gangtey and Punakha in their inimitable style. We watched the black necked cranes in the valleys, indulged in hot stone baths, chanted with Buddhist monks, visited the amazing *dzongs*, and learnt about the Wheel of Life. The climb to the stunning Tigers Nest perched on a steep cliffside, interspersed with mindfulness meditations, was a dream trek. We were a group of Italian, French, Japanese and Swiss, and all beginners at meditation. No matter. We had lots of laughter and reflected on our lives together. The testimonials were good. I knew this was the need of the

HEALING RETREATS

Mystic-Asia's (91/98110-86976; mystic-asia.in) upcoming events include: ■ Inner Child Workshop & Yoga in Mary Budden Estate, Binsar (April, 2010) ■ Inner Silence retreat in Aman Kora, Bhutan (July, 2010) ■ Detox and Yoga Nidra in The Farm in The Philippines (September, 2010) ■ Yoga in Balipara and Kaziranga in Assam (October, 2010) ■ and Ayurveda in Kerala (November 2010).

hour. One of the participants later wrote in and told me that revelations at the retreat helped him to get back with his estranged wife. What great news!

My other favourite is the spa at The Farm in the The Philippines. Set in the highlands two hours away from Manila, the detoxification programme at The Farm is thoroughly professional, treating the body from inside (with colonics) to outside with traditional Filipino massages. I sat in a sea salt water tub with my body covered with banana

leaves for a calming one hour before I had a reflexology treatment under the stars overlooking their infinity pool. Later as I ate my dinner, it was impossible to tell that the haute cuisine was vegan and raw! The place is spread over several acres with beautiful villas with countless water bodies and meditation centres scattered across the lawns. The Farm does not starve you, the food is exquisite, the cleansing is thorough, and the charming manager Michael and his wife Jennifer, are always at hand to support you. The cathartic experience at The Farm is totally life changing. And the best part is you don't have to do anything, it's all done for you. You will just come away a few kilos lighter than when you started! It's definitely a must for anyone seeking to have a healthier life.

Next on our agenda is to go on an elephant trek in Assam, maybe take the Brahmaputra cruise, and spend a few days in a tea plantation where we hope to give you an understanding of the way our bodies speak to us. Yoga anyone? ✦



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