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around asia
Effie-Michelle Metallidis

Yoga and fasting in Goa, the land of corporeal excesses

The wind beats against palm trees as dark clouds roll in. The long-snouted mongoose that habitually shuffles around the gardens has disappeared, and the sky, normally replete with the incessant buzz of insects, stills.

Monsoon season has rolled into India, and the coastline of Goa is spared none of the downpour. Rain sluices in sheets against the Beach House, a small resort on the tip of Sernabatim Beach in the south, where I've sequestered myself to detox.

Now, the idea of detox does not send me into throes of wheat-grass ecstasy. The concept conjures up waif-like hippies floating through thatched huts as they starve themselves for a week.

However, the Beach House's weight management programme is different. It is not a stint of yoga and fasting, as I had naively assumed upon gliding through reception in hemp pants, ready to affirm myself into positive states of being.

No. The programme, run by Sanda Wellness, began several months ago, and is based on a "three-chakra" system that evaluates clients on their psychological, physiological and physical health. After an initial check-up – a bone density test, a bioelectrical impedance analysis (aka, body fat test), an arm measurement here and a neck measurement there, the real assessment begins.

What do you hope to achieve in your time here? Do you have some habits you'd like to change? Let's talk about your earliest memory of food. Is there a lot of anxiety in your life? How would you like to try a hypnotherapy session? We can re-programme your brain to change some lifelong habits – are you free this afternoon?

It's a lot to take in. But the all-female staff of nutritionists, therapists and Ayurvedic doctors is patient. Having gone through the detox process themselves, they know of the ups and downs, the uncertainty, the dragging fatigue and the sudden bursts of energy; the bouts of anger and the flashes of elation – in short, the effluent of abrupt, shocking change.

There are the enthusiastically accepted changes – the daily massages that take place in small thatched huts, a fan lazily beating overhead amid the smell of wild flowers medicinal oils and the caw of birds. Punam and Iris, pint-sized masters in the art of silencing curmudgeons, execute their skill through daily reflexology, lymphatic, and Ayurvedic treatments. (It's a sad testament to modern-day convenience that the "mouse-knot" I have in my right shoulder – due to clicking at the computer all day – took five days to remove).

Then, there are the daily sessions of sunrise yoga that wake the body and clear the mind, and the afternoon workouts of tai chi or aerobics on the mosaic deck that overlook the crashing waves of the Arabian Sea.

There are the assessments done by an Ayurvedic doctor – in my case, the ever-patient Ajita, who walked me through all aspects of the holistic practice: how to assess the *doshas*, or the overall constitution of a patient, to better balance the diet; the practice

of yoga as a form of medicine; and the explanation of what's inside the little brown pills I've been taking for weeks now – 80-odd herbs pounded together by pestle and mortar to yield treatments for the liver and the blood and a variety of other salubrious causes.

There are also the talks, made interesting by the infectious enthusiasm of the staff that delivers them. Francine, a spirited nutritionist and fitness expert, extols the body as a finely tuned machine broken by modern eating habits. Gemma, a t'ai chi practitioner and hypnotherapist, demonstrates the acupressure method of instantly getting rid of cravings, and discusses how stress is closely linked to eating.

Then there are the not-so-enthusiastic changes. The strict diet of liquid meals that forms the gastronomical spectrum of the day. Juice for breakfast, juice for mid-morning, juice for afternoon, soup for dinner (save one delicious, sink-your-teeth-in-it masterpiece of solid fare for lunch).

There is also the – how shall we say – vigorous internal cleansing that occurs on a number of levels, which includes shots of wheat-grass and spirulina, the ungodly taste of which is unable to be masked by any combination of fruit juice, and a daily regime of diluted coffee whose use cannot be entirely discussed in public. Let's just say it's not for drinking.

But the combination of all treatments yields a stupendous effect on the psyche. Smokers have quit at the Beach House; drinkers abandon their drink and the potbellied Mediterraneans with a fetish for food – well, they learn how to dial back the crazy.

That is to say, the body regains control as the mind is ushered, like a feral animal, back into its cage. Too often in the daily grind (or my daily grind, at least), health is abandoned at the expense of the deliverable, be it a project, a deadline, or, as I re-enter school, a paper or exam.

But if the body cannot function, the mind suffers. The mind suffers, and the body receives the punishment – be it in the form of fatigue, stress, or a dozen doughnuts and a jar of Nutella in the parking lot of a Spinneys on a Monday night.

Initial results have proven a great success. Kilos lost: four. Centimetres: 12. But the ultimate result remains to be seen in the coming weeks as sessions of hypnotherapy sink in. The team will be following me for 12 weeks, which is a great way of keeping clients accountable, and offers them key support when necessary.

Like right now, for instance, as I head to Kathmandu, when all Patty, my travelling companion, and I can think about is how to strategically raid the chocolate aisle at duty free on a 30-minute layover.

A seven-day wellness package at the Beach House (Sernabatim Beach, Goa; www.thebeach-housegoa.com; 0091 832 668 3030) costs 118,000 Indian rupees (Dh9,676), based on single occupancy. Return flights on Air Arabia (www.airarabia.com) from Sharjah to Goa cost from Dh1,306, including taxes.

➔ Next week: Effie arrives in Kathmandu, Nepal.



Dark monsoon clouds hang low over the sea beside the Beach House in south Goa. Effie-Michelle Metallidis for The National

coming up



Explore the forests and glacial lakes in the High Tatras on the Polish-Slovakian border on a week-long trip organised by Exodus. Courtesy of Exodus.co.uk

On the right trail

Escape the summer with one of these walking holidays in Europe

Spain

Enjoy peace and quiet on this self-guided walking holiday through the diverse landscapes – mountains, sea, coastal cliffs and deep Mediterranean woods – of Catalonia in eastern Spain. Designed to include as much stunning scenery as possible, the trails include walks along the banks of the River Fluviá, along the picturesque beach at its mouth, inland through the sprawling Aiguamolls Nature Reserve and around Castello D'Empuries, a small medieval village full of Gothic architectural gems. Prices start from £352 (Dh2,104) for a four-day trip, excluding flights. The price includes transfers, accommodation, local transport, most meals and equipment rental (including maps, GPS and a mobile phone). The trip is also available with a three- and five-night itinerary (from £329 [Dh1,980] to £439 [Dh2,644]). Visit www.catalanadventures.com or call 00 44 1273 600 030.

Belgium

This nine-day adventure will take you across forests, valleys and rolling hills in Belgium. Walk through the woodlands of the Central Belgian Ardennes from La Roche en Ardenne through the towns of Sprimont, St Hubert, Nassgone, Awenne, Mirwart, Daverdisse and Bouillon. Highlights include a trail along the banks of the 165km River Ourthe; a visit to Lavacherie, a quaint village in the Frey forest, one of the largest in Belgium, and Mirwart, famous for the 11th-century castle of the same name; a walk across the valley of Marsau; and a day exploring the beech woods around the town of Mogimont. The tour ends in Bouillon, Luxemburg, a modern town steeped in history and sitting on the Semois River. From £697 (Dh4,197) for a nine-day, land-only tour, including accommodation, most meals, transport, route notes and maps, a discount card for the area and transfers. For more details, visit www.worldwalks.com.

Poland

Spend a week in the Tatra Mountains on the Poland-Slovakia border and end with a city tour of the Polish city, Krakow. The day walks in the High Tatras, part of the "granite" Carpathian Range, follow a sophisticated network of trails to old mountain cottages, the Studeny Potok waterfalls and the Valley of Seven Springs, the Green Lake, and the mountain Skalnate Pleso. The trip ends with a winding but easy and stunning walk up to Slakovsky Stit, 2,452m above sea level. On the last day, explore Krakow. It's full of history, with famous sites that include the old city, Mariacki Church, Central Market Square and Wawel Castle. The walks are conducted over six to seven hours daily. The land-only trip costs from £619 (Dh3,727) per person, including accommodation, most meals and park entrance fees. For more information, visit www.exodus.co.uk or call 00 44 208 675 5550.

Georgia

A nine-day explorer's holiday that is a good introduction to Georgia, this trip offers plenty of walks, including a three-day trek through the Grand Caucasus Mountains, camping in the high meadows close to the Russian border, and day visits to cultural sites. Highlights of the trip include a trek to Tetu Peak, a homestay in the mountains, a visit to Gori, the birthplace of Joseph Stalin and home to the Stalin Museum, and a stop in the ancient city of Mtskheta, which lies at the confluence of the rivers Mtkvari and Aragvi, about 20km north of Tbilisi. The nine-day "Wild walk in the Caucasus" costs from £1,290 (Dh7,768) per person, including accommodation, most meals, government passes and permits, entrance fees and all transport outlined in the itinerary. International airfare is not included. Call 00 44 20 7736 3968 or visit www.wildfrontiers.co.uk.

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ask the expert

Take the scenic route from Bangkok to Koh Samui

Q Is August a good time to visit the island of Koh Samui in Thailand or will I be swept away by the monsoon rains? What's the best way to get there? I was planning on flying direct from Bangkok, but is there a cheaper option?

A While the best time to visit Koh Samui is from December to February, August is pleasant, too. Unlike Bangkok, the island has its rainy season from September to November. Remember, though, that this is Thailand – it can get quite hot and humid at times, with an occasional thunderstorm to liven things up.

Bangkok Airways (www.bangkokair.com) has several direct flights to Koh Samui daily. A return flight costs from 7,020 Thai baht (Dh846), including taxes.

Thai Airways (www.thaiairways.com) flies from 13,120 baht (Dh1,582) return, including taxes.

An inexpensive option is to fly from Bangkok to Surat Thani, a city on Thailand's south-eastern coast and a bus- and ferry-ride from Koh Samui. A return flight with Air Asia to Surat Thani from Bangkok costs from 2,700 baht (Dh325), including taxes.

From the airport, catch a minibus or van (about 150 baht [Dh18] per person) for the one-and-a-half-hour ride to Donsak Pier, east of Surat Thani. Ferries depart from the pier every half-hour for Koh Samui (150 baht [Dh18] per trip, per person) and the neighbouring island of Ko Pha Ngan. The boats to Koh Samui sail through the Samui islands, so not only do you save

money but you get to journey along an extremely scenic route. Book tickets at the Raja Ferry office (00 66 77 471 151) outside the Surat Thani Railway Station or online at www.rajaferryport.com. If you aren't planning to spend a night in Surat Thani, don't take an evening flight – the last boat from Donsak leaves at 7pm.

One of the best ways to travel to Koh Samui is by the overnight train from Hua Lamphong Station in Bangkok to Phun Phin in Surat Thani. At Hua Lamphong, you have the option of purchasing a "combined" ticket, which includes the train fare, a bus transfer to Donsak Pier and an express boat ticket. The journey by train takes about 11 hours; add another two hours for the bus and ferry to Koh Samui.

Combined one-way tickets cost 1,200 baht (Dh145) for first class and 800 baht (Dh95) for second class (visit www.thairailways.com for more information and timetables). Taking a day train, of course, means that you'll end up missing the last boat to Koh Samui.

The cheapest – and longest – way from Bangkok to Surat Thani is by bus. It's around an 11-hour, 650km road trip from Sai Tai Mai, or the Southern Route Bus Terminal, on Borom Ratchachonnani Road. First-class fares cost 346 baht (Dh42) per trip. Non-airconditioned buses cost 192 baht (Dh23) per trip.

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