

LUXURY



CENTRE STAGE
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Marie Antoinette



ROYAL RETREAT

Where does a Queen go when she's feeling frazzled? To an Indian haven where guests moonbathe naked and sheep mow the lawns of course. Catherine Fairweather drops in

Photographs by MAHESH SHANTARAM



My baptism of fire upon arrival at Soukya, a holistic health centre in India, is an invitation to Full Moon Meditation. I join Soukya's other 'patients': solo health seekers; holidaying couples; the wheelchair-bound, and the walking sick, and sit down in front of a bamboo hedge. We crane our necks to the sky as the 'blood moon' rises, a flaming orange orb, above the palms. Dr Lavanya, our meditation guide, invites us to focus on its luminosity. 'Full moons signify the end of a cycle; so it's a good time for self-reflection,' she intones, 'a time to shift bad habits and to manifest hopes and desires through the power of positive thought.' Those unfamiliar with the concepts and practice of manifestation and meditation, wriggle a little in their seats.

The path is easier, she suggests, in an agreeable practical voice, with pranayama, or controlled breathing. We breathe through alternate nostrils to channel a clean flow of air. Bhramari breathing is next: 'Hum like a bee while plugging up your ears.' To hear the sound and timbre of your own voice vibrating through your rib cage is a literal buzz. Pranayama, meanwhile, which works on the neurological pathways to quieten restless minds and jagged nerves, is integral to naturopathic healing.

I feel calmer, despite creeping jet lag. The process seems to release some valve in my diffident group, judging by their full-blooded chanting of 'Om Shanti' at the end of the session. Later, in the privacy of my cottage garden, one of four among the 25 suites on the 30-acre estate outside Bangalore, I strip off and go 'moombathing' in the buff, soaking up the cicada soundtrack. This is the Soukya effect. Artist Catherine Goodman, who has had sell-out shows at Hauser & Wirth, New York, and is the co-founder of the Royal Drawing School with King Charles, is a Soukya devotee. She often accompanies her friend Queen Camilla here on retreats. Soukya seems to bring the subconscious to the surface, says Goodman, which helps her to draw better.

Her vibrant abstract canvases hang in the office of Soukya's proprietor, the moustachioed, charismatic homeopath, Dr Issac Mathai, as well as decorating the walls of the rooms that Camilla stays in when she visits, christened the Presidential Suite. At 2,500sq ft, this is more like a three-bedroom private villa and it is filled with framed photographs of the Queen, smiling and relaxed, in situ, with her sister, Annabel Elliot, and other members of the family, who have joined her on her nine visits to the retreat. 'We love to come here as often as possible,' says Annabel. 'To reset our batteries and decompress away from the pressures of busy lives. When I don't come, I miss it.'

The rooms open on to a garden with a lotus pond fringed with banks of butterfly-attracting lantana and doum palms, indoor-outdoor showers, and a bathtub. Soukya is about old-school elegance and nostalgic comfort without

the glitz. The brown furniture, rattan and chintz are straight out of a colonial-era plantation house, or an English manor.

The Queen is a familiar and beloved figure here, says Dr Mathai, and although she takes the place over with her retinue of family, friends and security, she's never princessy - gamely carrying her own bags and parasol. The four trees she planted on an earlier visit, including a flamboyant purple jacaranda, are now tall and willowy, casting welcome shade. She and King Charles are fans of integrated health, which marries the science of orthodox medicine with the intuitive holistic care of the East. Indeed, this is how the King and Dr Mathai connected first, when delegations from the then Prince's now-disbanded Foundation for Integrative Health came to Soukya's inauguration in 2002.

The King's plea is for 'a more balanced way of looking at the world and more harmonious ways of living', as he wrote in his 2010 book, *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World*. That holistic vision, which stresses the interconnectedness of nature and the universe, and embraces agriculture, education, architecture, nutrition, community and health, is what Soukya is all about. Hence the moombathing.

In truth, it is not difficult to find peace in a jasmine-scented sanctuary for migrating

OPPOSITE Writer Catherine Fairweather, wearing Soukya's standard-issue white tunic and trousers, outside the resort's bar, which serves only vetiver root water. BELOW A quiet place for reflection



butterflies and birds. Breakfasts of idli and pomegranate juice under the vine-covered terrace offer a ringside seat on nature's comedy show. I watch egrets make long strides across the outlying lawns. They Hoover up bugs disturbed by the estate's lawnmower sheep, while peacocks police the boundaries. I spend the hour of my abhyanga massage, with the curtains and French windows thrown open on to an aromatic garden, watching the antics of India's greater coucal, a foot-tall cuckoo. The two therapists working in unison on my medicated oil-slathered back do their best to relax me into the rhythm of the strokes and the beat of the recorded tambura and sitar. But the colourful bird, devouring a dragonfly and skewering me with a beady scarlet eye, has stolen my attention.

There are few other distractions: TV and Wi-Fi use are monitored, and idle dining-room chit-chat and strenuous exercise are discouraged so as not to overstimulate guests' brains. In the teatime 'bar', which serves bitter pink vetiver root water and nothing else, the clocks set to five different time zones seem meaningless. The pool stands empty most days, and time thickens as I sit mesmerised by a tiny sunbird sucking nectar from a fuchsia bloom or the slow-motion, spiralling descent of a ginkgo leaf. The me who can't normally stop jiggling my leg,

practises stillness. To quote the Welsh poet WH Davies, what are we here for if we have 'No time to stand beneath the boughs/And stare as long as sheep or cows'?

I seem to have flown halfway around the globe to sit and cuddle a newborn lamb. The smallholding that provides the eggs, cheese and milk for the kitchen, is the beating heart of this sanctuary. The sustainable farm with its vermicompost, rainwater harvesting and solar energy, must have warmed the cockles of King Charles's heart when he visited. I comment to Dr Fefin Francis, one of the resident Ayurvedic doctors here, as we walk round Soukya's medicinal garden, workshops and apothecary. It is here that 150 ingredients – roots, minerals, leaves and barks are grown, harvested and processed and used for medicinal oils and powders.

Dr Francis tells me that the benefits of these medicines, which have been used in the ancient system of Ayurvedic healing for 5,000 years, are increasingly scrutinised by orthodox medicine and validated. Ayurveda has gone mainstream, and it has gone global. January 2024 was a pivotal moment when the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases included Ayurveda in its globally recognised health framework.

'This allows for systematic tracking and integration of traditional systems of healthcare,' he adds. 'And while treatments and therapies themselves haven't changed, the implementation techniques have been updated.' Nasal cleansing, or sutra neti, is still practised here, 'so beneficial for headaches and hysteria', but it no longer involves a piece of beeswaxed string pulled through the nostrils. Instead, it's a jala neti, a neat little watering can that I get to take away. Who knew that flushing the nostrils with saltinated water could give one a natural high?

Soukya's cows' urine is apparently still harvested to help treat psoriasis (it undergoes a rigorous distillation treatment before it's used). And the enemas, which are still an important component of the Panchakarma detox programme, are no longer administered via a goat bladder; 'although, of course, it's the same idea: a flush with cannula inserted into the rectum,' explains the good doctor, without missing a beat.

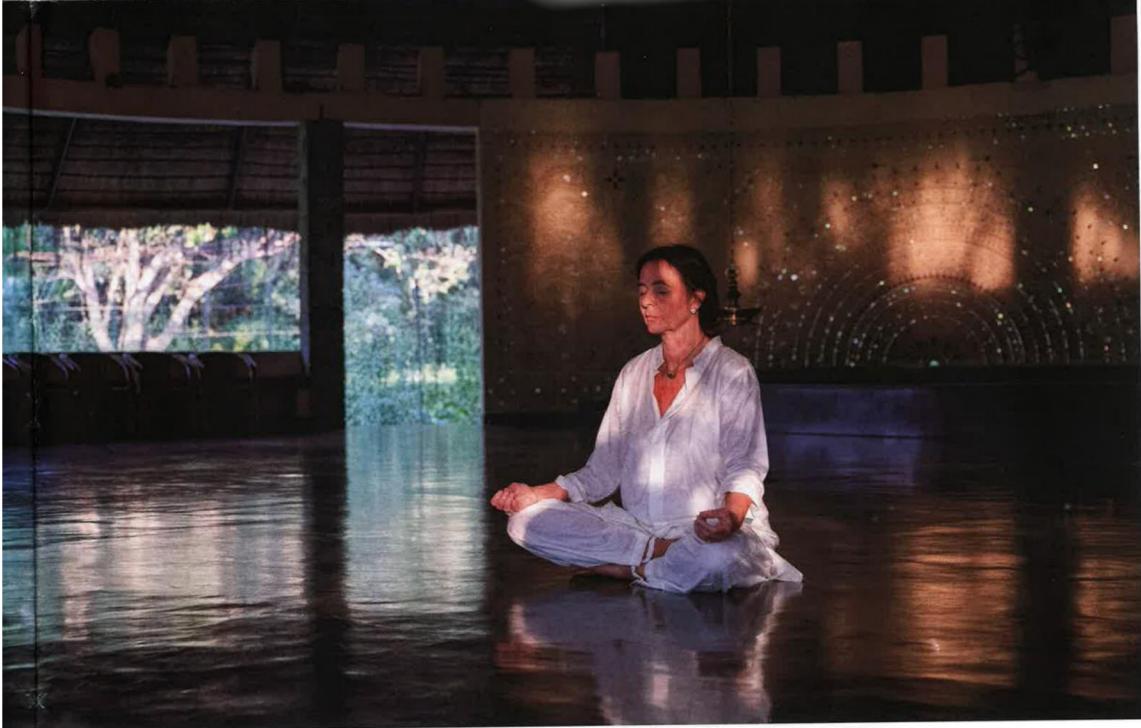
All this talk of bodily fluids and private parts has me squirming like a schoolgirl. Ayurveda, with its buckets of oil, and gloopy scrubs and full-on, intimate, four-handed massages performed on the slippery, naked body, is not for the uptight. But it's just that combination of earthy and ethereal, sensual and spiritual that I relish in this uniquely Indian cure. The spiritual side is catered for with the Full Moon Meditation and yoga. The latter, performed in a beautiful, open room, with a black oxide floor 'to soak up negative energies', is not the sweaty, fast-paced exercise routine that I think some of the high achievers here would have preferred. The practice is slow and focuses on breathwork.

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT Catherine finds stillness at Soukya meditating, practising yoga, and walking along one of the paths that encircle the estate. Around 150 plants are grown on the estate for Ayurvedic medicines, oils and potions. The Presidential Suite where King Charles and Queen Camilla stay during visits



ABOVE King Charles in 2019, watering a champaca sapling he planted at the retreat, watched by Queen Camilla, Soukya's proprietor, Dr Issac Mathai, left, and his wife, Suja, right





Therapists at Soukya begin every treatment with a prayer, chanted over your supine body, and the working day starts with the entire staff, including Dr Mathai, coming together for a communal blessing.

Dr Mathai has come a long way from his beginnings in a Keralan backwater, assisting in his mother's one-room homeopathic home clinic. A European sister retreat is due to launch in 2027, a 40-room, 150-acre property in a Portuguese forest. It will be run by the same Indian Ayurvedic doctors as the one in Bangalore, where a week will cost upwards of £5,000 per person for a starter Taste of Ayurveda. This is the rejuvenation and detox programme that I'm signed up for today; some R&R under balmy skies, an MOT and, with luck, a little weight loss along the way.

The theories of Ayurveda are based on five elements: earth, fire, water, ether (or space) and air and the relationship between them. Each of us has a different balance of these elements, which is why all medical treatments at Soukya, as in all authentic Ayurvedic clinics, are personalised. Every regime and diet is also individualised, and mine is tailored to rebalance my own particularly sluggish Vata-Kapha dosha (or bio-energy). For those of us not fasting, the low-carb, low-salt, low-spice vegetarian menu - overseen by Suja, Dr Mathai's vivacious nutritionist wife - is delicious and filling. It comes

with a side order of a description of the benefits of each bewildering ingredient: moringa and amaranth, and bottle, ash, ridge, ivy and snake gourds. The teaching is key. We are here to learn that our wellbeing is in our own hands.

But for now, I've abdicated all sense of personal responsibility, and relaxed in the position of choice. I won't have to think for myself or worry about what to eat or do with the day, or even what to wear since Soukya's white tunic and trousers are standard issue. I'm more than happy to give myself up to the care of the doctors, who monitor my intense programme daily. A nagging detox headache on day three is seen off with camphor added to the shirodhara oil, a bout of insomnia with some herbal pills. It's a refreshing antidote to Zoom appointments with an absentee NHS GP.

The majority of patients come here to deal with serious complaints; neurological, respiratory and endocrine disorders, as well as allergies, addiction and depression. Soukya's approach, which combines homeopathy, Ayurveda, naturopathy, yoga and meditation, alongside counselling, succeeds best with lifestyle-related afflictions and complex autoimmune and chronic inflammatory diseases. They've also had success with people suffering from type 2 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, hypertension and poor mental health. Modern medicine is also only just now catching up with

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what Ayurveda has always known; strong immunity is all about good gut health since the digestive system contains approximately 70 per cent of our immune cells.

At the end of my stay, before my final check-up, I wave goodbye to the charming khaki sari-ed gardener, who always down tools to greet me with a namaste, palms pressed together in front of her heart. I am three kilos lighter, I'm sleeping better, my face is less puffy, my fists have unclenched, my pulse is calm, my eyes and spirit are bright. As I pack away my nose flush and yoga PJs, I consider that the lessons learnt here are not rocket science, nor are they a fast track to enlightenment. Rather, a stay here is an opportunity to think about what is important in your life and how best to steer your course forward. And it's offered in a natural retreat that delivers an extraordinary level in an atmosphere of gentleness and kindness. No wonder it gets the royal seal of approval. ●

soukya.com; theglobalretreatcompany.com