

# A FOREIGNER'S GUIDE TO SEHATVAN



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*Forest therapy sounds nice on paper, but actually experiencing it can be a shock. Here are a few reflections, written by a foreigner for foreigners, to make your transition easier.*

## 1. “Water from the stream, the pond, the well, yuck! Won’t I die?”

Even though humans, like all animals, have been drinking unfiltered water from natural sources since the beginning of life, the idea strikes most of us as disgusting. And for good reason: industry and its contamination have made many sources unsuitable for consumption. But here at Sehatvan, water has been tested and proven to be every bit as safe as filtered or bottled water, but far healthier. Rich in minerals and microorganisms, countless animals – including the local people – drink from these sources to fortify their immune systems.

### “Microorganisms – you mean, germs?”

Germ. That’s another concept many of us find terrifying. But in fact, there are currently far more bacteria cells in your body than human cells. You are more germ than person. The human body is an ecosystem, and like all ecosystems, it thrives on diversity. Antibiotics, sterilization practices, and bottled water have left us with depleted microbiomes, but drinking the water here will help restore them.



The presence of countless frogs – which are extremely sensitive to pollution – attest to the purity of the water. You will also be glad to know that we are the first point of human contact with the stream down the road. Between here and its source there is only forest reserve.

You may still get sick, however. This is not because the water is unhealthy; it is only that our systems need time to adapt. If at any point you grow weary of adapting (since it might involve digestive problems), you can boil your water to eliminate the risk (and many of the benefits).

## 2. “Help! Everyone is speaking in Hindi! I don’t know how to interact!”

They are speaking this way because it is most comfortable; it is not to exclude you. Levels of English here vary greatly. Some may be timid about speaking it at first, but most would love an excuse to practice. Try sparking a conversation yourself. This is a fascinating country and Indians are enthusiastic to share their culture. Ask about something that interests you or something you don’t understand. Ask about the food you’re eating, or an upcoming festival, or where everyone is from and what their town and region is like, or request recommendations for your trip. You might even ask to learn a few phrases from their language so you don’t feel so lost. If at any point you want to participate in a Hindi conversation, just be direct and ask, “What are you talking about?”

But remember too that an important skill is the ability to sit in silence and not become anxious. Maybe they are immersed in a conversation and you don’t want to interrupt. That’s fine. There is no obligation to talk. Sit back, enjoy the bird and insect song, and breathe.



### 3. “Um... An embarrassing question: how exactly do I... well, you know... *poop* here?”

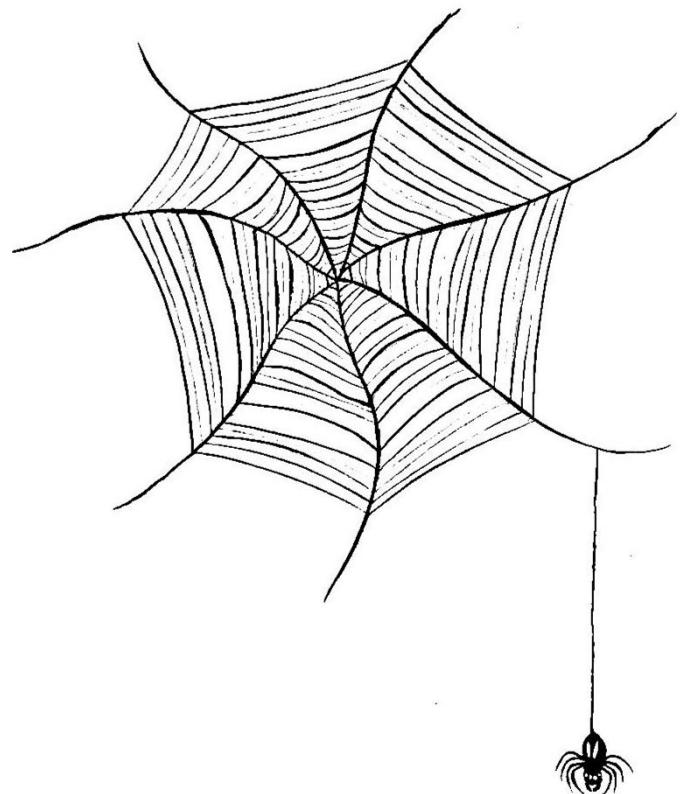
In many cultures we are afraid of our own excrement, but Indians are not. The transition from a feces-phobic to feces-acceptant lifestyle can be unsettling. There are many compost toilets on the premises, but they are likely not what you are accustomed to. They are basically just a hole in the ground (remember that simplicity is elegance). Here are a few options for how to use one:

- A) Western-Lite: Bring a bit of toilet paper. Squat over the hole (great for developing leg muscles), and perform your duty as usual. Then cover both your waste and the used paper with the dirt available in the stall.
- B) Western Savage: Run out of TP? Use leaves! But not just any leaves. Some are too small, others have an unpleasant texture, and a few may give you a rash. Ask someone at Sehatvan which leaves are appropriate for your purposes.
- C) Go Native (the Indian way): Fill up a pitcher of water and bring it back with you. Perform your task as usual. Then use your hand combined with the water to clean yourself. Afterwards when you are presentable, come out and wash your hands more thoroughly at the pump using soap. This may strike you as disgusting, but please consider all of the toilet paper that is saved by this practice (and remember that paper comes from trees). And psychologically, this may help you to feel more accepting of your body and its natural processes.

### 4. “These buildings are all falling apart! It reminds me too much of my own mortality!”

Life is impermanence. Therefore, what is closest to impermanence is closest to life. Think of a spiderweb which breaks everyday. Often, the spider even eats the web itself, either to reabsorb the nutrients or just to set up again elsewhere with a change of scenery. Nature has no interest in making something last forever, because what lasts forever is too rigid to evolve. Perhaps this acceptance of the ephemeral is why spiders are always in such a good mood.

That which disappears quickly does not contaminate, and that which must be built again and again is always as good as new. See the cracks, see the crumble, and smile. Then maybe when you look in the mirror, you will do the same.



## 5. “Snakes and scorpions and spiders, oh my! If the water doesn’t kill me, the monsters will!”

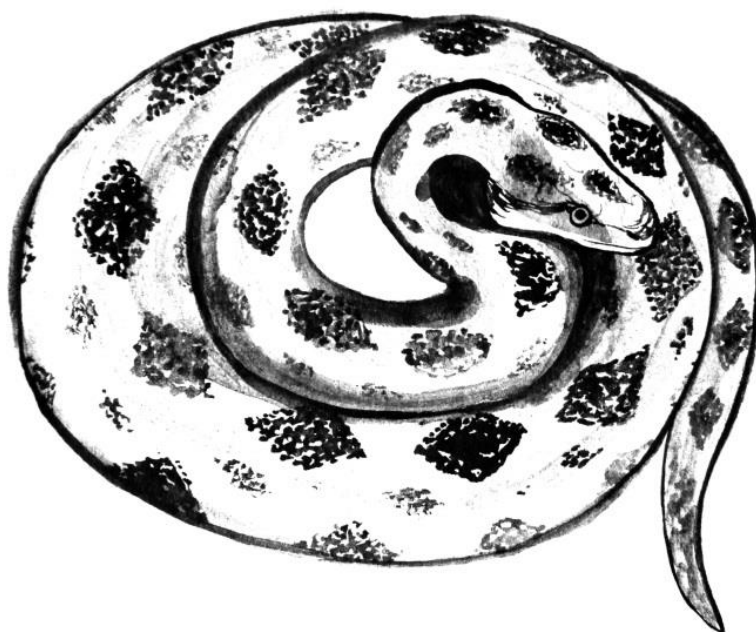
It’s true, there are a few dangerous animals in the area. But the probability of encountering one is small, and the probability of it attacking you is even smaller. All of the living breathing Indian people around you are evidence that a lethal animal encounter is extremely rare. But just in case, here are a few tips for how to avoid dying:



- A) Always carry a torch/flashlight at night
- B) Don’t walk barefoot through vegetation, or at all after dark
- C) Don’t go deep into the forest alone; but if you do, make noise as you walk to alert animals of presence
- D) Study the Poisonous Snakes poster
- E) Try not to fall asleep in the middle of a field

Infinitely more likely than dying at the jaws of a scary animal is to be frequently pestered by tiny almost imperceptible ones: ticks and mosquitoes that suck your blood, ants and centipedes that bite, and so on. If you find yourself plagued by ticks, try soaking in the pond

or stream to drown them, or take a sun bath in the sun hut to dry them up. For further protection, ask someone at Sehatvan if there is skin oil available to repel them. To deal with ants and centipedes and other angry insects, cover your feet as much as possible when walking through areas with vegetation, especially at night. And again, as tempting as it may be, resist the urge to fall asleep in the middle of the field.



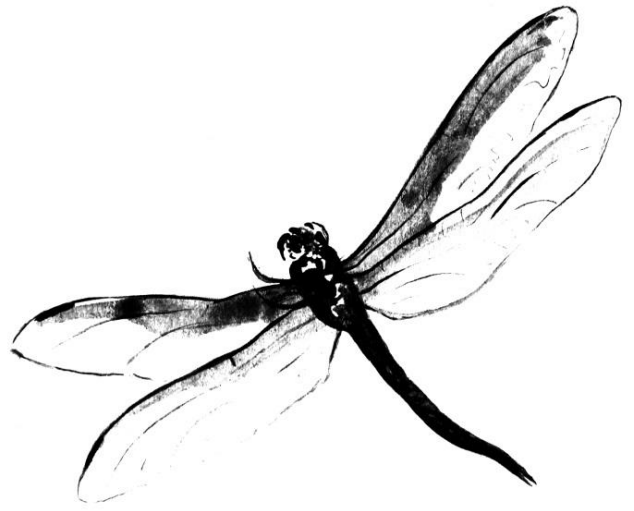
## 6. “There’s no shower! How am I expected to clean myself?”

There is in fact a shower stall, and someone at Sehatvan will be happy to point it out to you, but it consists only of filling up a pitcher of water and dumping it over yourself.

Another option is to bathe in the stream or pond. The stream is especially nice if you enjoy running water, but the pond nearby has its own all-in-one soap/shampoo/conditioner: mud. That’s right, the news is in: dirt isn’t dirty and can even be used to clean. Use the nutrient-rich earth on the shores and floor of the pond to scrub your skin and wash your hair. It is an excellent exfoliator and far cheaper than some fancy French cream. Rub it all around, then take a swim and it all falls off, leaving you smooth and sleek.

Your first days without your favorite bathroom routine may be unpleasant, but as your body gradually adapts to the natural surroundings, you will see that cleanliness is far more psychological in nature than physical. In fact, many of us are accustomed to cleaning ourselves so often that we become filthy: excessive hair and skin washing strips us of oil and can lead to the body overcompensating for the loss by producing extra, thus leaving us constantly greasy; washing your hands too often disrupts the balance of the healthy microbiome and can result in more harmful germs taking over.

Although the transition may be difficult, if you resist the urge to constantly groom yourself, you will eventually reach a new equilibrium of natural hygiene and body image contentment.



## 7. “I see people eating with their hands. Isn’t that bad manners?”

Indians value simplicity and a direct connection between their bodies and the environment. Hence, no toilet paper, and for some, no forks and knives.

According to the Vedas, the hands are the primary sense organ for experiencing the world, and the five fingers represent the five elements. Thus, eating is meant to be a full-on sensory experience, not limited to the tongue alone.

Research also shows that there are health benefits to eating with the hands: nerve endings on the fingers send messages to the body to prepare for digestion; skin microbes from the hands can now reach the stomach to contribute to its biodiversity and health; and of course, if you have to touch your food first, you will never accidentally burn your mouth because it is too hot.

Remember too that manners are culturally relative. Practices like eating with the hands, chewing with the mouth open, and sitting on the table may strike you as impolite – but please take a moment to imagine what customs from your own culture might seem in poor taste to an Indian tourist!



**8. “I’m a female and I’m not sure how to dress. I don’t want to scandalize anyone by showing too much skin, but I don’t want to bake in the heat either.”**

This is a delicate issue, and there are no clear answers. It can be tricky to balance respect for local customs with your own habits and social beliefs.

Within the confines of Sehatvan, you may dress as you like, but do be aware that revealing too much will attract attention from others. When you leave Sehatvan and walk along the street, it

is requested that you cover most of your legs and chest in order to avoid offending the villagers. This request is not made with any political agenda. It is only that the founders of Sehatvan are not from this village either, and for them it is important to maintain a drama-free relationship with the locals, so that foreigners like you may continue to visit into the future.

Bathing can be complicated too, especially if you only have a two-piece swimsuit. Fortunately, there is a great spot by the stream where you can find privacy. Walk down the road until you reach the stream. Just before the bridge, turn left to descend, and follow the shore (do not cross the stream). On your left is a short path between the bushes that will lead you to a beautiful pasture with your own private pool. Cows will come, and occasionally the local guru known as Baba-Gi, but he is very friendly and will not disturb you.

## **9. “I don’t see a dust bin. Does that mean I can just throw my trash anywhere?”**

No, you cannot just throw it anywhere. Sehatvan may look dirty and chaotic, but this is in order to maintain a natural aesthetic, and nature is not full of trash (or rather, it shouldn’t be).

There is no way to recycle plastic, glass, or metal here. If you have brought any of these materials, please collect them in a bag and take it with you when you leave. Women on their periods should take their used pads with them as well, and cloth pads are available at Sehatvan upon request (Sol the artist suggests obtaining a reusable menstrual cup, because you will no longer create unnecessary waste and you will save quite a lot of money in the long term).

Food waste can go in the compost container in the common area, and paper waste can go in the paper bin. Everything else, please take with you!

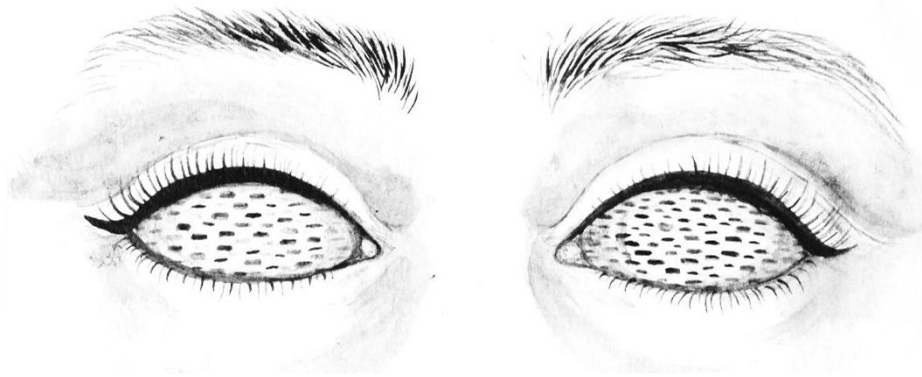




## 10. “So this place is solar powered... Is there enough electricity for me to watch all my favorite shows at night?”

There is sufficient solar power at Sehatvan to provide light and charging for electronic devices. However it is requested that you charge exclusively during daylight hours. If you charge after sunset, there is the risk of draining the battery and causing a blackout. You don't want to be responsible for everyone losing light just so you could check your WhatsApp, do you?

Furthermore, technology fasting is one of the practices used at Sehatvan to contribute to wellness. You've come all this way to immerse yourself in nature and enjoy the benefits of forest therapy. Why would you want to waste this opportunity staring at a screen?



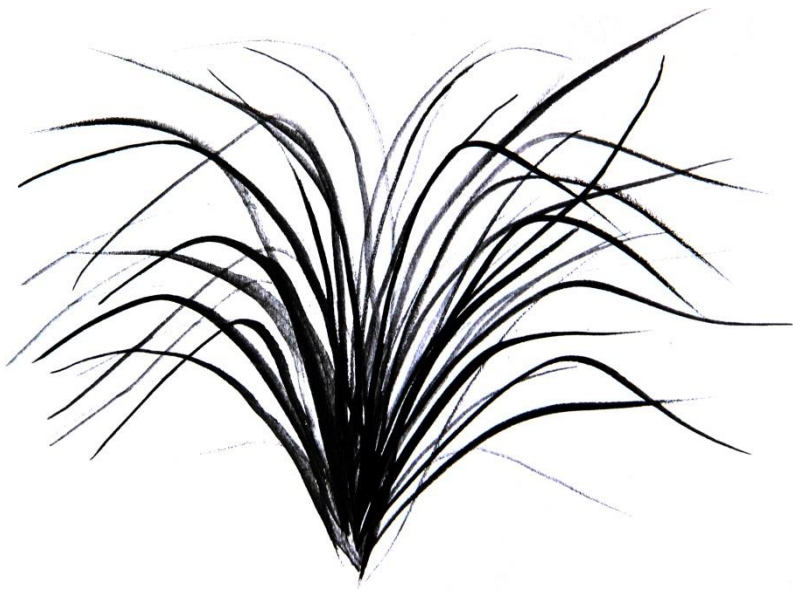
## “No phone? No TV? No laptop? No Playstation? What exactly am I expected to do with my time?”

A friend's father once told me, “Only boring people get bored.” Now is your chance to explore sides of yourself that you can't find time for amidst all your screens. Maybe you have some passion you've been neglecting, or maybe there is a new passion waiting to be discovered and explored. Experiment with art, music, writing, birdwatching, cooking, plant identification, hiking. Enjoy some nice conversations. Check out a book from the Sehatvan Library in the main hut. The possibilities are only as limited as your imagination.

But now is also your chance to feel like you don't need to fill all your time with some productive activity. Overstimulation in our lives leads to overstimulation in thoughts, and the result is that we constantly feel tense and crazy. Between activities, try just sitting still for awhile and being at. If you can learn to tolerate yourself, then tolerating Sehatvan will be no problem.

## 11. “Why is everything so dry here? I expected the forest to be green and lush.”

The ecosystem here consists of deciduous forest, which means that for some months out of the year the trees fast, losing foliage and color (Nature too understands the benefits of autophagy). The green season is of course beautiful, but the dry season has its advantages as well. Many wonderful flowers blossom in this period, and the lack of vegetation also makes for ideal wildlife spotting. There are also fewer insects. Every season and indeed every moment is unique in its beauty, so whenever you arrive, consider yourself fortunate.



## 12. A few final tips:

- Beware of green chilis! Indians leave them in large chunks in the dishes so that they are easy to spot and remove. However, if you don't know they're there, or if you are eating in the dark, you might actually consume one whole, and this will result in several sweaty minutes. So be on the look-out. If you do accidentally eat a green chili, you can eat some sugar afterwards to ease your suffering. Also, if you remove a green chili with your hands, wash them immediately afterwards!

Otherwise, there is the risk that you may

touch some part of yourself and suddenly experience very spicy eyes, nostrils, or other organs.

- Find a few moments just to listen to the beautiful natural music all around. Much of the stress of city life is due to the constant barrage of noise: traffic, construction, loud TV, amplified music, and all the whizzing and whirring of electric devices which we barely perceive but unsettle us all the same. Noise detox is an important part of the Forest Therapy experience. When you lie in bed at night, or when you find yourself with nothing to do, just let your thoughts clear away and soak in the insect chirps, the bird song, the breeze through the leaves. Also take a walk to the stream and enjoy the soothing effect of running water.
- If you've come as part of a retreat group, you may find Sehatvan full of people. Perhaps you'd like a bit of solitude. Here are a few options, arranged by proximity:
  - 1) Take the Noni Path to the bamboo forest;
  - 2) Take the Sun Path back to the area around the solar panels and vegetable garden (an excellent place for bird watching)
  - 3) Walk down the road to the stream; there may be people bathing, so if you want more privacy, go down the hill just before the bridge and take a left before the bank of the stream; follow the bushy path until you arrive at the stream's continuation in a peaceful pasture
  - 4) There are a few paths that lead into the forest reserve, and this is the best way to commune deeply with nature; they are however difficult to locate, so you will need someone to point them out to you
- If you venture out of Sehatvan much, you will probably run into the local sadhu, referred to as Baba-Gi. Although he may look wild with his loin cloth and painted beard, he is very friendly. Please tell him 'hello' from Tom and Sol ("the musicians").

**This concludes *A Foreigner's Guide to Sehatvan*. If you have any additional reflections to help guests in the future, please write them in the pages that follow.**





