



# TRANSFORMATIVE *Travel*

**HOTEL  
O-WARDS**  
*58 Winners  
That Just  
Might Change  
Your Life*

**AUSTRALIA**  
*Wellness  
Destination  
of the Year*

LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE  
SPECIAL EDITION  
SUMMER 2026

# EDITOR'S LETTER



## The Original Wellness Retreat

Here, in this issue dedicated to transformational travel, our editorial director, **Pilar Guzmán**, checks in to the cure hotel that started it all.

**SOMETHING ABOUT THE VERY NAME**—Ananda in the Himalayas—evokes all the open-endedness of the mythic mountain range itself. Personified as Himavat, the “King of Snow” and father to the goddess Parvati, the Himalayas are the central backdrop to much of Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist mythology. So when Ananda’s founder and managing director, Ashok Khanna, set out 25 years ago to open a premier wellness retreat bringing the ancient spiritual and well-being practices of the region to a modern-day clientele, it was no coincidence that he chose the Himalayan foothills, the legendary meditative home of Lord Shiva and the gateway to the holy Ganges River, as the site. Perched in the foothills at 3,500 feet, en route to ever more sacred pilgrimage sites at higher elevations, Ananda serves for those lucky enough to spend 7, 14, or 21 days there as a kind of geographic and metaphoric base camp for mental, physical, and spiritual evolution.

For people who don’t already pray to the gods Shiva or Vishnu, or for whom yoga is a practice that one squeezes in between the last meeting of the day and dinner prep, Ananda

is a deep commitment; it requires you to submit yourself fully to its philosophy.

I soon realized that surrender would be my refrain for the whole trip. Committing to nonrefundable flights was step one in that process. And then there were the inevitable setbacks

that spare almost no one who travels to India. To wit, a four-hour departure delay from New York, which is no biggie on its face, in this case meant missing the last connecting flight to Dehradun and trading a 45-minute connecting flight for a 4.5-hour drive northeast from Delhi. For an inveterate traveler who always plots her “just in case” escape, this protracted journey forced me to forgo what is, in the end, an

illusory sense of control. After 20 hours of travel, if you are lucky enough to nap for most of a car ride and wake up at 2 a.m. to the fragrance of a sal forest, as I did, you too might have your first experience of lucid dreaming.

Even though I didn’t end up falling asleep in my room until 3 a.m., I woke up with the sun and the cacophonous calls of numerous bird species. Over the course **[ CONTINUED ON PAGE 108 ]**

Ananda is set within the grounds of the Palace Estate of the Maharaja of Tehri-Garhwal overlooking the Ganges and Rishikesh, considered the spiritual home of yoga, meditation, and Ayurveda.

## Cherry-Cardamom Ricotta Cake

SERVES 8, TOTAL TIME: 1 HOUR, INCLUDING BAKING

1 Tbsp unsalted butter, at room temperature  
3 cups sour cherries, pitted  
¼ cup red vermouth  
¼ cup packed light brown sugar  
5 organic eggs  
½ cup granulated sugar  
½ cup heavy cream  
1 cup ricotta cheese  
2 tsp ground cardamom  
¾ cup whole-wheat bread flour  
Crème fraîche, for serving

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Grease a 9-inch round cake pan with the butter.
2. In a medium bowl, stir together the cherries, vermouth, and brown sugar. Allow the cherries to macerate for 10 minutes.
3. In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat the eggs and the granulated sugar on medium speed until pale yellow and very frothy, 4 minutes. Pour in the cream, ricotta, and cardamom and continue to beat until combined. Turn off the mixer and fold in the flour with a flexible spatula until incorporated, making sure not to overmix.
4. Strain the cherries, reserving the vermouth mixture. Layer the cherries, along with any undissolved sugar bits, in the prepared cake pan. Pour in the batter and bake until the cake is slightly golden and a cake tester or skewer inserted into the center comes out clean, about 30 minutes.
5. Remove the cake from the oven and allow to cool on a wire rack for 10 minutes before flipping onto a round plate (choose metal or melamine for easier transport). While the cake is still warm, drizzle the reserved vermouth mixture over it and serve with a dollop of crème fraîche.

of my stay in the region, I would see and hear the Himalayan black-lored tit, the black drongo, the blue-capped rock thrush, the crested kingfisher, and the Himalayan monal. Blinking on my balcony, I took in a Hieronymus Bosch-like mash-up of tropical, subtropical, and temperate vegetation: Sal, pine, teak, and banyan trees commingled with *Alice in Wonderland* forests filled with broad-leaf jamun trees, bamboo, oleander, poinsettia, and guava.

As much as Ananda ultimately prizes rest and relaxation, getting to that state is no joke. Whether you seek hormonal rebalancing, weight management, detox, immunity boosting, or chronic pain treatment, bespoke programs adhere mostly to Ayurvedic medicine and traditional Indian wellness practices, often blending yoga and Vedanta with Chinese medicine and newer Western modalities. And it starts before you arrive, with a detailed questionnaire covering everything from your exercise habits and vocal register to your baseline temperament and the quality of your bowel movements.

Each stay begins with an in-depth intake by an appointed Ayurvedic doctor. His or her first order of business is to determine your *dosha*, a principle in Ayurveda referring to the three foundational energies, formed from nature's five elements (space, air, fire, water, and earth), that are thought to govern our physical, mental, and emotional health. *Vata* consists mostly of air and space and determines movement in the body; *pitta* combines fire and water and dictates digestion; and *kapha*, a blend of earth and water, translates to "that which holds things together" and drives stability. Each dosha is associated with certain physical, mental, and temperamental attributes, though everyone has all three within them. The balance of those three elements shapes an individual's unique character, or *prakriti*.

"Every single person fits into these three categories?" I asked Dr. Naresh Perumbuduri, somewhat incredulously, when he determined that I am a *vata*, and then, on second thought, deemed me *vata* with some less-dominant *pitta*. "Everyone is a mix, but yes," he said,

fixing his enormous amber eyes, which looked almost backlit, on mine for a few extra beats, as if to make sure I was following along. That all of my meals, treatments, and diagnostics would hew to what seemed, at first blush, like an arbitrary designation raised my journalist's natural skepticism. But then he listed some *vata* attributes: energetic, creative, boundlessly enthusiastic, adaptable. I'll take it! Even some of the less savory expressions of *vata* imbalance—*anxiety*, dry skin, insomnia, and constipation—felt uncannily accurate.

Whether you come to Ananda for the Panchakarma, a 21-day Ayurvedic purification program designed to cleanse the body, balance the doshas, and restore physical, mental, and spiritual health, or a 7-day holistic detox as I did, all programs are grounded in the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta. As a lapsed Catholic, I instantly connected with Vedanta's universal nondualistic approach, a belief that all religions are solving for the mysteries of the human condition and that no single faith has a monopoly on truth. Vedanta teaches that experience rather than strict dogma—"timeless truth" over blind faith—is the path to spiritual growth. Ultimately optimistic, Vedanta is rooted in the belief that the soul's true nature is divine and that higher consciousness, redemption, and freedom come through self-knowledge and successive rebirths.

As such, even the simplest treatments feel like a baptism, with ancient techniques and traditional powders, oils, vessels, instruments, and wooden beds. Seasoned practitioners perform ceremonial prayers and songs at the beginning and end of each session and care for you like an infant. Apart from my medical and physio diagnostics, I experienced a dozen or so treatments: These included the *Abhyanga Swedana* four-handed massage, in which two synchronized therapists work from head to toe using herbal-infused sesame oil; the not entirely pleasant but cleansing *Nasyam* nasal detox, which flushes the nasal cavity, where so many infections originate, by pouring herbal oil into each nostril; the hypnotic *Podi Kizhi Sathailam*, a rhythmic full-body massage done with heated bundles filled with herbal powders; and the *Aroma Cocoon*, a lymphatic drainage massage, followed by a

warm blanket wrap to let the oils soak into the skin.

I also had two acupuncture and cupping sessions, an intensive reflexology session, and a deep-cleansing facial, which quenched my incurably dry winter skin (a signature vata trait) with pure essential juniper and holy basil oils. A one-on-one hatha yoga class, though less athletic than I am used to, required new levels of stamina and proprioception. I got an assessment from a skilled physiotherapist, who determined correctly as I rolled out on a foam roller that my lower back and hip pain were the result of fascial tightness, not a jammed QL as I had been told by a chiropractor in New York.

Just as revelatory was the food by chef Diwaker Balodi, who prepares dosha-balancing, locally sourced daily menus with elements of Indian, Thai, and European cuisine. To balance my dry, light, cold vata nature, my meals were warm, moist, and easily digestible. As I ate delicately spiced lentils, soups, and congees, I felt for the first time in my life on the receiving end of all of the careful food preparation I have done for my own children, making sure they got the right balance of nutrition and pleasure. Best of all, I took all of my meals, weather permitting, on the wraparound treetop dining deck, which was like my *Swiss Family Robinson* childhood dream come true.

I left campus only once, to witness the Ganga Aarti, a nightly spiritual ceremony honoring the river goddess Maa Ganga (Mother Ganges) that takes place on the banks of the Ganges River in Rishikesh and notably in two other sacred river cities, Varanasi and Haridwar. After a 40-minute car ride into the center of town, I walked 15 minutes with a guide, weaving through motorbikes and a warren of shops and eateries, down to the river, where priests first blessed us individually. At dusk, a larger group of priests wearing traditional white kurtas tied with red scarves convened on podiums facing the river. They performed a choreographed, 45-minute ceremony representing the purification of the soul, the five elements, and the eradication of darkness, at times waving multitiered, open-flame brass lamps in a clockwise direction. Accompanied by the sound of bells, conch shells, and

the rhythmic chanting of mantras, hundreds of worshippers joined in, passing offerings of flowers and candles around the bleachers. If you had told me that this was the holiest day of the year, the equivalent of Easter in the Christian world, I would have believed you, given the size of the crowd and the emotional outpouring. The fact that it was a regular Wednesday speaks to the pervasive spirituality and sense of the collective in this part of the world.

The next day, I had my final treatment of the week: the Tibetan Kuu Nye massage. Something about the combination of cupping, kneading, and acupressure with hot Himalayan crystal-salt poultices and stones dropped me immediately into my parasympathetic nervous system, that true “rest and digest” state that I’d experienced at various points during my stay. The massage seemed to do its job of releasing blockages and stimulating energy flow, so much so that tears streamed spontaneously out of my eyes. Though they came unannounced, and unaccompanied by the usual rhythmic breathing or lump in the throat, my body was speaking what my mind seemed to have no words for. As a recent empty nester, I realized I am like a border collie with no sheep. After 22 years of making breakfast, lunch, and dinner, watching soccer games, helping with homework, signing permission slips, and riding the emotional roller coasters of adolescence and fledgling adulthood, I realized I was running in circles looking for my flock, when the only one left was me. Like so many women my age caring for kids, aging parents, employees, and spouses, I’d lost the muscle memory for attuning to my own wants and needs.

When I returned to my room, heavy rains had amplified the gray scale of the silk-screened skies from charcoal to silver. The mountains across the valley looked as if they might be a galaxy away but at the same time like I could reach out and touch them. The perspective warp was fitting in a place that never lets you forget that you are everything and nothing, an individual who both contains the divine within and is an infinitesimal speck of dust in nature and the universe. The irony of utter humility against this mighty mountain range is that you feel, maybe for the first time, that anything is possible.

[ OH, MICKEY: CONT'D FROM PAGE 37 ]

Animal Kingdom, my adventure-seeking father took Bowie on her first “big girl” ride. Avatar Flight of Passage is a 3D motion simulator where you ride a banshee and soar over an alien landscape. They came off of it beaming, bragging that Bowie hadn’t shown an ounce of fear.

With grandparents taking turns with each child, my husband and I were able to spend quality one-on-one time with each of them as well, which went a long way toward alleviating the guilt we had experienced since making Bowie a big sister. We returned to our hotel around noon each day for a few hours so my son could nap. While I stayed with Rain, my husband would take Bowie to the pool, where they’d race down the waterslide together or make believe they were mermaids looking for hidden treasures.

As is often the case with travel, the best moment for me was the one I had originally planned to skip: namely, Bowie’s appointment at the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique at Magic Kingdom, a makeover salon nestled inside Cinderella’s castle where kids can be transformed into their favorite princess (or prince). My mom and Bowie had been talking about it for weeks, wondering which dresses would be available and debating the merits of the various hairstyles on offer. I figured this would be a bonding experience for the two of them and that I’d meet them after.

Instead, I tagged along, and from the moment our Fairy Godmother apprentice greeted us, I got swept up in the, dare I say, magic of it all. After carefully weighing her options, Bowie decided she wanted to be Elsa from *Frozen*. When we stood in front of the mirror in the changing room, Cinderella’s Fairy Godmother appeared, waving a wand and anointing Bowie a princess. Bowie took the role very seriously, gracefully curtsying to us before moving on to get her hair done. After her hair was pulled back into a princess ponytail, the stylist sprinkled her with pixie dust so that she could carry some magic with her for the rest of the trip. As anyone with kids knows, glitter has a way of permeating everything it touches—even, in this case, the deepest recesses of this naysayer’s heart.