TRAVELS, CONVERSATIONS & OTHER NICE THINGS

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From a Distance

A journey to Ananda in the Himalayas precipitates a seismic perspective shift that's only partially due to the altitude.





I am unwell. Or, rather, I am not a well person, a person who regularly practices wellness. Even now, as I step gingerly into my 50s, I am not someone who has ever developed anything resembling an exercise routine. I routinely eat bad foods and mainline coffee. I am only on passing terms with sleep. As a result, my body has become almost porous, physically and psychically; I absorb stress like a sponge. This made traveling to Ananda in the Himalayas, a wellness resort tucked into the foothills of its namesake mountain range, both tantalizing and daunting. I hoped to return looking and feeling like a new person, fully reset. My fear was that I wouldn't be able to — that the wellness program would be too arduous, and trying to de-stress would only stress me out more.

I need not have worried. The experience struck a careful balance between comfort and challenge: serious enough to be effective but set amid surroundings so beautiful that you're too distracted to miss things like alcohol, meat, or your mobile phone (banned in most common areas of the resort). Thanks to a prearrival screening, the Ananda team had already begun building me an Ayurvedic-based itinerary. Ayurveda, for the unfamiliar, is an ancient Indian system of medicine and holistic wellness that centers on balancing three bodily energies, or *doshas*, through diet, herbal remedies, yoga, massage, and lifestyle. A resort doctor identifies your dosha and builds a bespoke plan, including a tailored diet, around it. Any fear I had of feeling restricted was quickly allayed by the food: mostly vegan, fresh, and always a little surprising. Guests are also encouraged to choose an area of focus: meditation, yoga, or physical activity. As a person with an overactive mind and zero bodily flexibility, I opted for fresh air and physical activity.

Situated in Uttarakhand, Ananda is a sprawling 100-acre sanctuary housed in the former estate of the maharaja of Tehri Garhwal. Between visits with doctors, a fleet of masseuses, and physical and emotional therapists eager to work you over, guests are free to wander the grounds or drop into communal meditation sessions. I woke each morning with the sun and a cup of warm water — no coffee, no caffeine — and went wherever I was told. Having chosen physical activity as my focus, I met daily with a personal trainer, mostly relearning how to stretch a body that years of hunching over a computer had quietly ruined.

For all that happened within Ananda's walls — the massages, the meditation, the nightly dharma talks on Vedanta, the philosophical foundation of Hinduism — nothing prepared me for what awaited off-property. One highlight was Rishikesh, the town along the Ganges where many pilgrims begin their journey. There, we attended the nightly Ganga Aarti, a riverbank ritual of fire and chanting, where visitors set small baskets of flowers alight and send them drifting downstream, hundreds of tiny flames scattered across the water. On the opposite bank, barely visible, the fires of funeral pyres burned steadily — a reminder that the Ganges is also the place where, for many Hindus, life is meant to end. Pushing through the crowded streets afterward, I finally understood what people mean when they talk about India's sensory overload: throngs of people, a smattering of wandering cows, more color and smell and sound than my mind could process. "You might be tempted to try some of this street food," my Ananda-provided guide warned. "If you want to enjoy the rest of your trip, I'd advise against it. Your body isn't ready."

The real highlights, though, were my daily hikes. Accompanied by a single guide, we climbed steadily upward, the countryside spreading out below and the distant Himalayas growing sharper. We passed through tiny villages, along dense forest paths where one might spot a leopard (we didn't), and paused to admire flowers and exotic birds, which my guide identified by their songs. On my last day, the hike wound through a series of small villages before reaching a bright red temple that seemed like it sat at the top of the world. After a blessing from a monk, we wandered the temple's upper levels, taking in an endless sprawl of snowcapped peaks. Our only distraction was a troupe of monkeys with which we'd been warned not to engage. When one particularly insolent lady monkey got too close, our guide offered advice I'll never forget: "Ignore her. Please, don't even look at her face."

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Invariably, the hardest part of visiting a place like Ananda is leaving it — not only because it's a respite from your real life but also because you're left wondering how to carry the experience home. There's a plain truth behind every wellness experience I've ever attempted: When you eat healthy food, sleep, and move your body, you will likely feel significantly better. Do it consistently, and you'll probably look better too. It isn't a mystery. Why, then, is it so hard to replicate in daily life?

During my first "emotional wellness" consultation, my therapist opened with a deceptively simple question: "What are you doing here?" Here, as in Ananda? Or here, as in on this planet? Thinking back on the past few months — marked by change, loss, and emotional tumult — I wasn't sure how to answer. She followed with another baffler: "What do you want?" Sometimes, it's the absence of context that properly forces you to reconsider your life. Your daily life is nothing like *this* — but then, what *is* your life? Reckoning with my own thoughts, so far from everyone and everything, was clarifying, and a little startling. I left Ananda feeling lighter and physically stronger, but more than that, as if something had shaken loose inside my mind: a reminder that one's self is actually worth caring for and that the most valuable moment in life may simply be a moment of pause. //

Word to the Wise ... The resort's recently released cookbook, *The Healing Plate*, not only offers recipes but also allows readers to assess their own dosha and adapt recipes accordingly. I have been able to recreate some of my favorite dishes from my stay, from congee variations to cardamom-roasted broccoli to a Golden Detox Elixir made with turmeric, apple cider vinegar, and multiflora honey. The required ingredients are generally easy to find, and nothing feels overly fussy. Even though I have not yet attempted making my own roti or cheela, I now feel emboldened to try.

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