

CENTURION

M A G A Z I N E

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The Art of Letting Go

MARCIA DESANCTIS CHECKS IN TO VANA, IN THE FOOTHILLS OF THE
HIMALAYAS, TO SEE WHY SOME CALL IT THE WORLD'S MOST
TRANSFORMATIONAL WELLNESS RETREAT.



Guests at Vana learn to play the *bansuri*, India's traditional bamboo flute. *Opposite*: An underwater view of Vana's pool.



WE HAD DRIVEN ABOUT AN HOUR from Dehradun Airport to get to Vana, the wellness retreat located in the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand. It was my first stop on a two-week stay in the Himalayan foothills, and my travel companion was my oldest friend, Martha McCully. Martha and I are a couple of Boston girls who have been wisecracking since kindergarten. But when we walked into the 10,000-square-foot plaster, pale oak, and glass *kila*—a Sanskrit word for “fortress” that Vana uses instead of *lobby*—we were both stunned into silence. It was an enormous, modern temple of cool beige, fawn, and white, where everything was in soothing alignment. I realized that I had never experienced anything like Vana’s quiet energy: It simmered from the rippled bamboo panels on the 25-foot ceiling to the flock of ceramic doves that hovered ethereally by the stairway, down to the creamy light-flooded sandstone floors overhung with bowls of marigolds. There were 55 other guests in residence, but there was not a soul in sight.

It was the exact effect that Vana’s founder and owner, Veer Singh, envisioned when he reinvented this remote

21-acre family plot of mango and lychee orchards surrounded by ancient hardwood forests six years ago. “We wanted you to leave your life, your status, the city behind in a sequence of steps,” he told me. The entrance, with its great wooden door that immediately hushes India’s swirl of color and sound outside, the path that leads through a forest of emerald-green bamboo: This is all intended to deliver you directly out of your day-to-day concerns and into “the heart and nucleus of Vana,” said Singh. “You surrender yourself to the experience.” Those are the people who have the best experience at the retreat, he added, “the ones that just let go.”

Singh, 35, is the son of Analjit Singh, founder of Max Healthcare and Max Bupa Insurance and one of India’s wealthiest businessmen. The younger Singh studied physics in London, and became interested in ecology, organic farming, and, subsequently, traditional systems of health and medicine. “It was a conscientious decision to create a place of wellness,” he told me of Vana’s founding. “But what exactly I wanted to do there came about later.” The project took five years and \$55 million to build.





Spa, sanctuary, monastery. Refuge, retreat, resort. Ashram, temple, clinic. Vana is all of that, and has become the go-to respite for many of the world's most high-powered people. But for Singh, the ultimate goal is even loftier. "I would like more than anything for Vana to be two things," Singh said: the first, a balm for pain, whether it be physical, mental, or emotional. The second, "a catalyst for a journey." Where that leads depends on the visitor. "It could be improving their health. For others, a beginning of a spiritual exploration. Others, a total life exploration."

And so off went my airplane togs and on went the white kurta pajamas and neon-green charmeuse scarf left in my room. I returned to the largely empty *kila* to nurse a spicy ginger-turmeric latte. A musician breathed a melody on the *bansuri*, India's traditional bamboo flute. Instead of checking social media—phones are banned from public spaces—I browsed a photography book from Singh's library. I soon encountered a sensation that would continue throughout my stay: I felt both totally at liberty and wholly cosseted by the property, like I could do

From far left: Fresh ingredients play a large role at Vana, which sources nearly everything on its menu locally; a view of the outdoor pool; Anayu, one of two restaurants on site.

whatever I liked, but whatever they wanted me to do was probably what was best. "Let go. Surrender. We use these words a lot here," Vana's director of operations, Prasoon Pandey, told me.

Vana's minimum program is three nights, but some guests devote weeks or months to retreats that target weight loss, stress, or *panchakarma*—an integrative detox that emphasizes diet, herbal remedies, yoga, and other traditional healing techniques from India's ancient Ayurvedic practices. Every *vanavasi*—Hindi for "forest dweller," and Vana's term for "guest"—begins with a visit to the doctor. Tenzin Choedon is a practitioner of Sowa Rigpa, a Tibetan system of medicine imbued with some Buddhist beliefs, Ayurveda, and traditional Chinese medicine (which employs herbs, acupuncture, and treatments like cupping and massage to promote

Vana is both a place to address corporeal ailments and “a catalyst for a journey,” said its founder, Veer Singh. “What that journey is could be different for many people: It could be improving their health, a beginning of a spiritual exploration. For others, a total life exploration.”



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well-being). The main diagnostic tool of Sowa Rigpa is the pulse. I was skeptical, but when Choedon took mine, she identified some lung, joint, and gastrointestinal issues—all accurate. Through our conversation she also determined my dosha—an Ayurvedic term for biological energy built around the five elements—as dominantly *pitta*, or fire and water, and designed for me a personalized regimen that promised to put my body in balance.

Although Vana’s comprehensive menu of treatments is two inches thick, ministrations are ordered by the doctor, not à la carte by the guest. It is fascinating reading nonetheless: several kinds of enemas, including one with honey and ghee; an Ayurvedic massage using a fermented cereal drip. Choedon had other therapies in mind for me. Each of the three treatment categories—Swedish massage and reflexology, Ayurveda, and Sowa Rigpa—has its own dedicated facility. In the Sowa Rigpa complex, I reclined on the table under a pleasant waft of burning incense for a Ku Nye massage. My therapist recited a short Buddhist prayer, dipped muslin-wrapped bundles of cardamom and nutmeg in oil, and pressed them onto the sore points of my body, which she had identified without my help. Afterward, I sat with a cup of bitter herbal tea and tried

to absorb the scent in the air and the loosening of my muscles. “There is something very gentle and loving about Vana,” said Tanja Ruhnke, a longtime fashion executive who, since her first visit in 2017, has returned two more times, and who exchanged emails with me after my return. “It gives you energy, strength, equanimity—when you go back to real life you are ready to face chaos graciously.”

The next morning, after a Tratak meditation where I stared into a candle for an hour, I was in the mood for human contact, which was good, because the day was surprisingly social. Yoga class focused on breathing and stretching rather than difficult poses, but it was packed, as was Salana, the downstairs dining room. We sat at a communal table with guests from Kuwait, Australia, England, India, and the U.S. One of them, Peggy Hedberg, a businesswoman from Madison, Wisconsin, has been to several wellness destinations and later told me that Vana “is unlike anything in the world.” She felt “remarkably calm and grounded,” she said, but also “filled with vitality.” She was just finishing the first week of her three-week stay.

It is hard for me to ignore a swimming pool, especially one as lovely as Vana’s, which overlooks a dense wall of forest. That afternoon I ran down the path shaded by the



Clockwise from far left: Among the body treatments at Vana is *udvartanam*, an Ayurvedic deep-tissue massage using herbal powders; *gom* meditation sessions focus on clarity, serenity, and deeper understanding; the orchard at Vana; the Forest Suite, like all of Vana's 66 rooms and 16 suites, is built with sustainable local materials and intended to evoke a sense of harmony and well-being.

property's giant lemon, red bottlebrush, and slick green frangipani trees to the water for a swim. Was it what my dosha required? I can't say, though it seems at Vana, even a simple splash has a higher, more purifying, purpose. Afterward I met up with Martha in Anayu, the Ayurvedic dining room, where Choedon had prescribed cooling, sweet, and stabilizing foods like a lentil-and-potato galette and cardamom-spiced chicken korma to counteract my "hot and sharp" dosha.

On our last morning, Martha and I swapped our kurtas for hiking clothes and drove to a climbing trail overhung with prayer flags. The dark peaks of the Siwalik Range were visible on the horizon from our path, and we stopped to rest at the confluence of two rivers. Our guide, Ashim Bhushan, brandished a tiffin of ginger infusion and vegetables wrapped in roti. He picked curry leaves to crush with our fingers, and pointed out plum-headed parakeets in a silver oak. Later, as I packed my bags, I recalled that first day, with its almost alarming suggestion of surrender, an idea to which I had so fully succumbed by my last. It was, I had learned, a balm to let the experts suggest the stewed apples instead of fresh ones; to let them decide who would heal me with what herbal concoctions; and to seek balance above all else and worry



only about getting to my treatments and classes on time. My stay there had ushered in an astonishing sensation of lightness, as if I had broken free of something. Now it was the noisy world outside that had me hesitating. Before we left, Bhushan tied a simple yarn bracelet called a *mauli* around my wrist for protection. One way or another, Vana was coming with me. *Rooms from \$380; vana.co.in.* 