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WELLNESS GOES BACK TO ITS ROOTS

Spiritual seekers have been drawn to the hills around Rishikesh, in the Indian Himalayas, for thousands of years. **MARCIA DE SANCTIS** visits a trio of high-end retreats that are channeling the region's singular energy in newly sophisticated ways.

A FEW MINUTES into my *pizhichil* ayurvedic treatment at Ananda in the Himalayas, I opened my eyes to get my bearings. Above me, a spa attendant was filling up a brass pot and handing it to a colleague, who then doused my body in a stream of warm oil. Specifically, *dhamcantharam* oil, which is infused with 28 aromatic herbs—all indigenous to the Himalayas—and is thought to reduce inflammation and stress. “Be relaxed,” the second attendant said, directing the contents of the

pitcher over my calves. There was nothing to do but lie still and marinate. I was in India, after all, and wellness is different there. You even could say it began there.

Ananda sits on a hill overlooking the city of Rishikesh and the turquoise waters of the Ganges River, which Hindus consider sacred. For centuries, pilgrims have traveled to the area to bathe in the river, visit religious sites in the nearby Himalayan foothills, and meditate on its banks. It was in Rishikesh that



EXPERIENCES

• *Taj Rishikesh Resort & Spa, which opened in late 2019, has commanding views of the Ganges.*

• *Early-morning sun salutations at Ananda in the Himalayas.*

the fame-weary Beatles sought enlightenment at Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's ashram, inspiring generations of seekers and backpackers to follow in their wake. The city bills itself as the yoga capital of the world; each year, the largest yoga festival on the planet is held at one of its hundreds of registered ashrams.

When Ananda opened 20 years ago, it was the first property to interpret the region's ancient wellness culture for an upscale, international audience. Today, it's one of a clutch of retreats in the area pitched at travelers who like their Savasana served with a cashmere blanket.

The newest addition is Taj Rishikesh Resort & Spa, opened last year. The retreat is perched high on a hillside above the Ganges, which here—close to its Himalayan glacier source—flows fresh and eye-wateringly blue-green. Across the river rise peaks crisscrossed with 400-year-old pilgrim's paths. It's a location that lends itself perfectly to purification and well-being, says Indian-Canadian businessman Arjun Mehra, who developed the property with his father, Ravi. "It calms the spirit which calms the mind which calms the body," Arjun told me. As might a glass of wine on the stone terrace. "We are not strict like an ashram, where you sleep on a concrete slab," he added with a laugh.

At Taj, the wellness program can be formal or loose. The hotel can design an intense multi-week detox or yoga package with a dedicated



guru to guide meditation or pranayama (yogic breathing exercises), but its wellness programs can also include something as simple as hiking a mountain trail or enjoying a spell of silence in the woods. One free afternoon, I was lulled into contemplation on the hotel's own white sandy beach, just watching the river rush by. "People connect with the Ganges, no matter what their religion," general manager Devraj Singh said. "It's incredibly healing."

Halfway down the hill toward the river stands an indoor/outdoor yoga studio and an outpost of Jiva Spa, Taj's standard-setting wellness brand. At



• A Hindu diya, or devotional oil lamp, forms part of a treatment at Vana.

• Serene views from the Riverside restaurant at Taj Rishikesh.

the spa, I was met with a warm brew made with jaggery (pure cane sugar), lime, and tulsi (holy basil) before settling in for a purifying scrub with Himalayan salt and coconut. The hotel's Rock Flour restaurant—named after the tiny particles of glacial stone that give this part of the Ganges its extraordinary color—has an ayurvedic menu made with ingredients grown locally, in the region's rich soil. Big on Himalayan staples like lentils, millet, and root vegetables, it's heaven for the wheat-averse.

Twenty-eight miles east, Ananda draws its wellness philosophy directly from the Vedas, the Hindu scriptures. Owner Ashok Khanna, a veteran hotelier and grandson of Mohan Singh Oberoi, founder of the Oberoi hotel group, built the retreat when the tech boom hit India, causing stress levels to spike. After visiting spas all over the world, he turned his attention homeward. "Why not offer what comes from right here?" he said.

A former maharajah's palace is Ananda's opulent focal point, and the grounds are peppered with palm trees and the royal family's marble pavilions. Most guests arrive and hunker down for intense yoga, meditation, or weight-management retreats, all of which incorporate diet recommendations from one of the spa's ayurvedic doctors. "It's not about juicing here," said Divya Babbar, Ananda's marketing manager. A doctor determined my *dosha*—the ruling energy that defines my constitution—and prescribed a menu to keep me in balance. The bottle-gourd soup and semolina gnocchi were

highlights, and I made secret stockpiles of the fantastic amaranth-and-raw-cocoa brownies.

Wearing the resort uniform of a fresh white kurta, or tunic, with white pants and a prayer necklace, I headed to my daily activities: surprisingly entertaining lectures by a scholar of Hindu philosophy, treatments in the 24,000-square-foot spa, laps in the lushly landscaped pool. And to yoga class, which was a revelatory series of classical hatha basics. As Ananda's yoga director, Sundeep Agarwalla, explained, "Though we have postures and different levels of practice, we treat yoga as it was originally intended." In other words, not as a physical exercise but as a spiritual one.





An hour north of Ananda, on 21 acres of ancient hardwood forest, a retreat named Vana offers a singular mixture of spirituality, wellness, and luxury that has made it one of the world's most sought-after retreats since its launch in 2014. Proximity to Rishikesh, the Ganges, and the seat of an exiled school of Tibetan Buddhism renders the location, in owner Veer Singh's words, "a spiritually potent place."

When I first entered the lobby—which Vana calls the *kila*, meaning "fortress" in Sanskrit—all the chaos and color of India dissolved. The sunlit common area opened before me like a massive Zen ballroom, where chandeliers made from silkworm cocoons and a flock of white ceramic birds floated from the 25-foot ceiling. "You feel guarded, you feel protected," director of operations Prasoon Pandey said. "The calm begins almost instantly."

Vana is nearly obsessive in its approach to each guest's individual needs. Reflexology and Swedish massage integrate with ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine, and the Tibetan healing practice of Sowa Rigpa. A doctor identifies what each guest's inner and outer selves require, and then prescribes from a mind-boggling array of treatments. My first stop: a *hor gyi metsa* massage, where my therapist recited a Tibetan prayer and dotted my body's nerve channels with warm, healing herbal poultices.

The doctor also left ample free time on my schedule, so I took yoga classes and peaceful walks through lychee orchards. The vegetable stews and curries, fish kormas, and porridges in my regimen also helped my equilibrium. Not on

my meal plan: lattes or any other form of caffeine, which I tried to do without. It is best, I learned, to submit to Vana's rhythms and let the experts take over. "Those who want to control their experience are not happy here," Singh said.

Five nights is the minimum stay at Vana, but many spend weeks in pursuit of their personal objectives: weight loss, detox, or stress reduction. "I want Vana to be the catalyst for a journey. To improve health, maybe, or to begin a totally new and provocative life exploration," Singh explained. For me, the concept of "retreat" became clear at Vana, as I swam in the sanctuary-like indoor pool and, later, succumbed to an hour of meditation staring at a candle flame. This place is not about marching in and demanding a facial, but rather taking a profound pause, and connecting first with ancient wisdom and then with yourself.

Inner and outer well-being, the balance of body, mind, and soul. Opulence and restraint. It is the search for harmony that this mountainous part of India has been perfecting for centuries—and the wellness industry in the West tries so hard to imitate. Ananda's Ashok Khanna summed it up simply: "We never called it wellness. It was just our way of life." ●

TRIP PLANNER

Multiple airlines offer direct service from the U.S. to New Delhi. From the Indian capital, you can fly an hour north on **Indigo** (goindigo.in) to the recently expanded airport in Dehradun. **Vana** (vana.co.in; doubles from \$610, five-night minimum) is about a half-hour drive. **Taj Rishikesh Resort & Spa** (tajhotels.com; doubles from \$245) is about a two-hour drive, and **Ananda in the Himalayas** (anandaspa.com; doubles from \$245, five-night minimum) is a 75-minute drive. **Jonny Bealby** (jonny.bealby@wildfrontiers.co.uk; 12-night trips from \$3,975 per person), a member of the T+L A-List and an India specialist, can create itineraries that incorporate one or more of these retreats.

▲ The temperature-regulated outdoor pool is one of four pools at Vana.