

Behind the Palace Walls

Ayurvedic medicine restores mind, body and soul at Kalari Kovilakom palace in Kerala
By **Karen Goa**

“Please leave your world here” says the sign in the cool marble foyer. I’ve already traded my banned leather shoes for a pair of rubber-soled straw sandals at the palace door. Alcohol, meat, white flour, caffeine, sugar – no chocolate! - TV and other unhealthy modern-world indulgences are also on the ‘no-go’ list.

At Kalari Kovilakom palace in the southwest Indian state of Kerala, the ancient healing art of Ayurveda is a way of life, not a tourist trifle. Would-be spa-goers turning up for a herbal face pack topped off with a poolside margarita had best put their crocodile-skin Guccis back on and find their hedonism elsewhere.

Once a retreat for Kerala’s Vengunad warrior-kings, the 19th century terracotta, stone and marble palace fell into squatter-ridden ruin as the fortunes of the Indian Raj crumbled in the 1960s. Set in the village of Kollengode near a luxuriant swathe of rice paddies, the carefully restored palace is one of nearly a dozen CGH Earth ecosensitive hotels and resorts owned by the entrepreneurial Dominic family of six brothers, who’ve transformed the derelict old pile into an exclusive 18-suite healing centre.

My suite lies at the top of an elegant wooden staircase. The carved and painted bedroom door is substantial enough to withstand slings, arrows and probably an elephant charge. Inside this vast and airy chamber of dark wood beams, whitewashed walls and etchings of Indian royalty I leave behind more of my world – my travel-grubby clothes.

After I slip on the white cotton *kurta* – a pajama-style long shirt and trousers – laid out for me on the bed I’m indistinguishable from the other ghostly guests wafting around the marble hallways.

Noon. Time for lunch in the palace’s set schedule of treatments and meals.

Dining is *al fresco* in a long covered hallway lined on both sides with *kurta*-clad diners. Each person sits at an individual wooden table. A ceiling fan swishes away the clinging heat; far away a bird trills a lullaby. It’s so soporific I nearly fall asleep in my chair.

Before lunch begins our calm, white-robed server glides by – and he really does glide – proffering a brass jug of water and towels for pre-lunch hand-washing. Talk, when there is some amongst the dozen or so Germans, Swiss, Austrians and a stray Brit, is about one thing: ghee treatment.

‘Have you started taking ghee?’ ask the dark-haired Swiss woman across from me, who’s here to de-stress herself.

I explain I’m a journalist and only staying for a couple of days. I have no idea what ghee treatment is, or if I’m going to get it.

She swallows, hard. “It’s not that bad, drinking ghee. Not really.’ Her lunch is a bowl of rubies. No, they’re pomegranate seeds. She scoops up a mouthful, slowly chews.

My lunch is hot ginger water, fat brown Kerala rice, and a coconut, pumpkin, carrot and bean curry. It’s plate-lickingly delicious.

Ghee is not for me - I won’t be at the palace long enough for any of the full 14- to 28-day programmes. Two of the palace’s three live-in doctors, Dr Jouhar.k and Dr Jayan, take turns explaining how oleation with ghee works. Drinking a few tablespoonsful of ghee – clarified butter – for 5 to 7 days is the detoxifying part of the general rejuvenation (*Pancha karma*) programme many of the other palace inhabitants have signed up for.

After ghee, there's an unpleasant-sounding day of purging. I'm not sure whether to whoop with relief, or beg for a little taste of ghee, just to see what it's like.

I try to keep up as the doctors run through the basics of Ayurveda: the aim is to restore mind, body and soul through balancing each person's *tridoshas*, or elements, of air, fire and water.

When these are out of whack, I'm told, so too is our health. Too much *kapha*, the water dosha, leads to weight gain and allergies. Cleansing procedures (that's the ghee), yoga, herbal massage, steam bath purification and meditation and an Ayurvedic diet all help re-balance the *doshas*.

My Western pharmacy-trained brain struggles, I admit, to grasp these holistic concepts. But Ayurveda is a much-practised science: for millennia Ayurveda has been the medicine of India. In every village on my visit I've spotted Ayurvedic pharmacies, some stacked high with herbs for grinding or distilling into medicine. The medicinal use of herbs is something I can get a grip on.

It's also childishly pleasant not having to think about what to do next in the day.

"People who make a lot of stressful decisions in their lives have no decisions to make here. It's very freeing," says Dr Jayan.

Freedom, though, only extends to the palace walls: the doctors discourage guests from roaming outside the gates into Kollengode village.

"We don't want clients getting sick when they're in a fragile state," explains Dr Jouhar.k. No village nightlife, then. Or sneaking out for contraband chocolate.

After a short physical examination and consultation about what ails me – not much except a bandaged pinkie finger mashed in a lawn mower handle in New Zealand and sore travelling shoulders – Dr Jouhar.k prescribes a four-hand massage.

It's extraordinarily relaxing. As I sit on a wooden stool two masseuses simultaneously rub scented oil on me from head to toe. I'm then eased onto an Ayurvedic massage table made of neem wood, and rubbed, lightly slapped and pinched front and back with four masseuse hands going all at once.

Music from an unfamiliar place and time drifts into the room. I want to ask about the herbs and oils the two women are smearing on my bits, but my face, even my eyelids, is so thoroughly melted I can't utter a word.

Afterwards it's clear why the palace guests spend their days reclining under coconut palms by the fish ponds instead of jogging around the Ayurvedic herb and veggie gardens.

My feet barely make the climb to my room. I briefly think about doddering off to the palace library to read up on Ayurveda but I'm so liquified my legs won't cooperate.

Yoga is next – but not the enlivening limb-twisting type. This is *yoginidra*, a sleeping meditation performed lying down, explains yoga master Vinod Kale. Sitting meditation is a punishment – too physically hard for clients, he says. The idea of *yoginidra* is to observe changes in emotions, bringing awareness to each breath and each part of body.

Think of something you want to resolve, Vinod encourages his roomful of clients, and repeat your resolve mentally until it happens.

That sounds easy enough, the relaxing bit anyway. I lie down on my mat. I fall deeply, instantly, snoringly asleep before I get anywhere near the awareness or resolve part. Not so easy, after all.

Six-thirty. Dinner time. When I poke my head inside the spotless palace kitchen two chefs are performing culinary feats with stone pots bubbling on a gas hob. The chefs lay

on all available hands to concoct as many as fifty different oil-free dishes every mealtime from veggies and herbs grown on the palace grounds or locally. Each guest's meal is individually prepared three times daily, every day, according to the doctors' prescription - something I hope I never have to do at a dinner party.

Some of the ghee-takers nibble at a small plateful of plain rice noodles. I devour the best tomato soup I have ever dipped a spoon in, plus cheese-free vegetarian pizza made of rice flour, pieces of tomato and fresh herbs.

Once again, mealtime talk is small. 'How are you?' is a loaded question.

"Do you really want to know?" whispers a peaky Englishwoman next to me. She's on ghee day 5. Not feeling too flash.

An Austrian woman on the other side looks perkier. She's finished the ghee. She has clarity of thought she's never had before, she says. She actually glows. The ghee, she's convinced, is worth it.

After dinner we troop out to the lawn to watch the masseurs practise Kalaripayattu, one of the oldest martial arts and, in princely times, the hand-to-hand combat of warriors. Kalari is impressively energetic, an orchestrated fusion of gymnastics, yoga, stick and knife fighting and sword dueling with shields. Afterwards Tomy, the teacher and a 17-year Kalari veteran, tells us his students practice an hour each morning to "charge the battery and the mind" enough to do six massages every day.

Marma, the art of locating and activating 107 pressure points on the body, is essential in Kalari. Not only is this handy for healing, but pressing the right point hard enough disables your enemy, or worse. When Tomy demonstrates by fingering a spot on my forearm it hurts. A lot. I'm pleased he's not my enemy.

As we walk back to our rooms at day's end one of the German ladies muses, "It's like being an inmate in an institution. But in a nice way."

All the sharp edges are knocked off this day and all days, behind the palace walls. Next time I come, I'll leave my Western world behind for longer.

Karen Goa visited Kerala courtesy of Singapore Airlines/Silk Air www.singaporeair.com, Kerala Tourism www.keralatourism.com and CGH Earth Hotels and Resorts www.cghearth.com www.kalarikovilakom.com