



FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

If your idea of wellness vacations transcends the generic, consider taking one of these specialised vacations in India that offer solace and enrichment in every way.

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Osho International Foundation; shutterstock.com



The definition of wellness, particularly in the context of modern living, has changed from mere indulgence and fitness to pursuing experiences that make you happy. Even though momentary, the idea behind having these experiences is to extend or replicate the ‘feel-good’ effect even after it’s over. Such a pursuit, therefore, urges us to take meaningful vacations, rather than simply ticking off places on our bucket lists. Let’s start with India, making the familiar unfamiliar and taking up journeys that never featured on our itineraries before. Whether it is a yoga vacation or a long break to meditate in silence, a holiday aimed at acquiring a new skill or simply going idea-hopping with fellow intellectuals, the options are aplenty.

THE TRAVELLING YOGI

“Don’t bend your knees and stretch those leg muscles. Exhale and extend your arms towards the sky.” Heard in the context of a vacation, these may sound like sky-diving instructions—but this one comes closer, with the thrill factor derived from perfecting your *suryanamaskar* (sun salutation). While it’s not easy to incorporate fitness into our daily routines, you cannot rule out the idea of taking a journey where the only objective is to align your muscles and thereby your mind, body and soul. These yoga tours are nothing like your resort escapades with half an hour of optional yoga thrown in. They take their *asanas* (poses) seriously and expect you to follow suit. While travel forms a major part of the itinerary, in some tours, participants are also expected to spend a few days at a yoga ashram. A typical day comprises *pranayam*,

followed by intensive yoga and sattvic meals with evening discourses on self-healing techniques.

If all of the above still fail to liven up your curiosity muscle, there are some bespoke holidays that incorporate adventurous activities along with serious yoga, and a good ayurvedic massage at the end of it all is never far away. Escapade Holidays, for example, follows up yoga mornings with trekking, river rafting, rock climbing and nature walks so that you “detox and then de-stress”, as owner Sanjay Saini puts it. And there is always room for spontaneity and surprises like the time when a group of Escapade Holidays was asked to perform Hatha yoga amidst snowfall atop Kuari Pass.

The other option is to check into yoga centres such as the Himalayan Iyengar Yoga Centre (HIYC) in Dharamsala and Goa where you gradually perfect a yogic pose with the help of props and practice. One of the key advantages of tours like these is undivided attention on fitness and living healthy in the company of individuals who are there for the same purpose.

Above: A group of Russian tourists performs yoga at the Kuari Pass, Uttarakhand.

Below: Participants at the HIYC in Dharamkot perform *supta virasana*.

Adventure-Cultural Tours (Escapade Holidays) offers intensive yoga courses in the Tehri Garhwal and Haridwar regions with expert instructors on board. For more information, go to www.adventure-cultural-tours.com and www.fitnessretreat.in

With Yoga India Tours, you can pick a tour in any part of the country and rest assured that yoga will follow wherever you go. For example, the Kerala tour packages are offered with a 10-day intensive yoga training, ayurvedic massage sessions and occasional sightseeing options. For more information go to www.yogaindiatours.com

Indian Holiday Pvt Ltd offers 12-day meditation courses in Rishikesh and Shivpuri, with a three-day stay in an ashram at Rishikesh. For more information, log on to www.indianholiday.com

Himalayan Iyengar Yoga Centre has a variety of residential programmes to choose from, details of which are generally displayed for the entire year on their website. Log on to www.hiyogacentre.com



GOING SOUL-O

You may have experienced it too—that momentary meditative feeling—when surrounded by the lofty golden-white Himalayas or upon first sighting the mystical Pangong Tso lake. Experts will tell you that meditation can be done anywhere, but amateurs will tell you how easy it is when you are in a setting that initiates effortless quietude. That meditation beats any other form of relaxation is a fact reiterated to the point of monotony, but combine it with a well-meaning vacation and you tap into a whole year’s quota of mental peace. India being the land of meditation, there is no dearth of places to find your calm calling, but the real task is sifting out the best and most suitable. One of the most prolific schools of meditation, Vipassana is offered in various centres spread across the length and breadth of the country. Living a simple ashram life in complete silence for 10 days characterises this course and the setting of vast landscapes surrounded by nature lets you sink deeper into self-discovery.

Similarly, Tushita Meditation Centre in Dharamsala is also a 10-day silent residential program that demands a little more seriousness and discipline, but they do have ‘movie days’ twice a week and a quaint little library to occupy your non-meditative time. Ladakh, with its quintessential tag of divine beauty, abounds with meditation centres—the setting ranges from eerily barren to soulfully pristine, challenging your inner

integrity in every way. The Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre in Devachan, Ladakh, is one such place that invites you to experience Buddhist meditation techniques in their three-day courses held during the summer months.

The Art of Living Centre in Bengaluru, on the other hand, is a more decorated form of meditation with on-site ayurvedic massages and plenty of community-based activities along with intensive meditation. For something really offbeat, though, head to Osho International at Pune to truly challenge conventional meditation techniques, right from dancing meditations to sufi whirling and speaking gibberish for disposing of your mental filth. Call it a resort or commune; the place juxtaposes simplicity with modernity so that the sleek architecture neither distracts nor depresses.



Clockwise from above: The Vipassana International Academy is strategically located in Igatpuri, a hill station; Mass dancing sessions are a regular feature in the Buddha Grove at Osho International; Meditating by a pond in the vicinity of the Art of Living Centre in Bengaluru.

In order to limit the number of participants per session, all Vipassana centres in India require you to send applications well in advance (months, in the case of the Igatpuri centre). For more information, go to www.dhamma.org

At the Mahabodhi Centre, courses are held only during the summer months and given the short period, it makes sense to book well in advance. Log on to www.mahabodhi-ladakh.org for more information.

The Tushita Meditation Centre has pre-planned dates for their residential programs, which are displayed on their website www.tushita.info

Art of Living, Bengaluru offers a range of courses outside of meditation such as the six-day ayurvedic cooking course. For more information log on to www.artofliving.org

Osho International, Pune is open all-year round and offers lavish accommodation inside the ashram with all modern amenities including a swimming pool and a cafeteria that serves simple food. Visit www.osho.com for more information.

Art of Living; Osho International Foundation; Vipassana International Academy



LABOURING FOR SKILLS

When was the last time you painted, sang, sculpted or wrote? And secondly, who said you can't have more than one hobby? Given our current lifestyles where there is almost no room for hobbies unless you're retired or have bagged your dream job, it is a highly tempting idea to learn something new or revive those brush strokes and vocal chords while you're travelling.

Authentic Adventures offers these learning-based holidays where sightseeing implies planting yourself in front of a scenic lake and trying to paint the picture in front of you with the help of an expert tutor who shows you the nuances of watercolour painting. Similarly, their singing tours help you open up and practise with fellow bathroom and bedroom singers while sitting on a houseboat in Kerala or against the backdrop of the setting sun in Jaisalmer. How much can you possibly learn on a 10-day holiday, you ask? Owner John Brough proudly claims that he has "received several emails from many of our guests saying they learnt more in a week than they did in a lifetime of evening classes. It is far more immersive than most people

can manage in their day-to-day lives." Similarly, Colouricious offers textile holidays where you get to learn the fine art of Indian embroidery in some of the main hubs such as Jaipur, Agra, Chanderi, Orchha, etc. While travelling is a major part of the textile itinerary, your main spots are cloth markets and trade bazaars to learn the fabric of things, quite literally.

A no-frills option, however, is to pack your bags and head to Andretta, about 12 km off Palampur in the Kangra district of Himachal, to learn pottery. Here, you can rent one of the homestay cottages and take the wheel at the Andretta Craft and Pottery Centre run by Mansimran Singh and his wife, Mary. They offer courses as long as three months in pottery for those seriously inclined. Apart from the pottery centre and its museum, you can also visit Norah's Centre for Arts, built in memory of Norah Richards, a writer-dramatist and one of the foremost developers of Andretta's art scene.

Authentic Adventures offers painting, singing as well as photography, cooking and walking tours with a recent inclusion of Shimla to the existing Kerala and Rajasthan. Go to www.authenticadventures.co.uk for more information.

Colouricious has a fixed set of tours in India every year, which are planned well in advance. Go to www.colouricious.com for more information.

The Mirage is perhaps the only well-equipped homestay option while visiting Andretta. The courses require you to register in advance by calling or emailing about them. The details can be found on www.andrettapottery.com

Left: Learning pottery at Andretta allows you to learn at your own pace without the pressures of a typical classroom atmosphere.

Top: A painter soaks in the view in Kerala before putting it down on paper.

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A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS

Picture this. You are travelling to some of the most stunning locales in India, all the while thinking about the themes of culture and identity in the Orhan Pamuk novel you have in tow. What if, later, you got to hear the last word from the author himself? I know I have your attention, you book lover! This is precisely the idea behind Classical Pursuits, a 16-day holiday in the central and northern belt of India that is planned every year to coincide with the Jaipur Literary Festival, so that you ponder as you wander. The idea is to explore India along with one of its most prestigious literary events, where your itinerary is dotted with regular book readings and in-depth discussions, with fellow travellers and writers.



The next Classical Pursuits holiday will be held in January/February 2014. Details and the itinerary can be found on www.classicalpursuits.com

Travels with Teri, a travel company based in Sausalito, CA, creates customised holidays to India. The itineraries listed on their website www.travelswithteri.com are sample tours that can be modified to suit your group's requirements.

Another such vacation beckons you to attend the Delhi and Kolkata book fairs with an expert antiquarian on board who can help you pick some rare gems from classical Indian literature. How do these fall under wellness vacations? Anyone who puts mind over matter will tell you how cathartic it is to be around people who share your interests as you spend a fortnight immersed in intellectual conversations everywhere—under the moonlight, on the ghats, in the desert, over breakfast or on a long cab ride. Teri Goldstein, former travel writer and owner of Travels with Teri that organises the Discover India's Book Fairs tours, explains that "books play an important role in helping people understand one another... doing that through the use of words is universal and therefore the book fair tours become an important meeting point for like-minded people." ■

Group book-readings and discussions form an important part of the Classical Pursuits tour.

UNWINDING IN SHILLIM

The quaint village of Shillim, nestled in the Sahyadris, harbours a magnificent wellness secret. The recently opened Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa here is among the largest and most comprehensive wellness facilities in Asia. At this world-class resort, they understand that the perception of wellness in India is changing, with an increasing emphasis on a healthy and wholesome lifestyle. Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa believes that the need of the hour is to recharge with a comprehensive wellness program with an assurance of hassle-free seamless service. They integrate total rest and well-being of body, mind and spirit so that guests may return to their everyday lives deeply refreshed and re-inspired. The setting, product offering and experiences combine to stimulate and invigorate.

The retreat provides a holistic wellness experience that integrates extensive facilities, services and customised wellness programs. Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa strives to nurture and heal the inner spirit and elicit lasting change at an energetic level. Inspired by the ancient healing culture of Asia, and incorporating the modern spa techniques, Shillim Spa integrates the three pillars of transformative wellness—physical, emotional and mental—to support guests on their personal journeys. The retreat provides a holistic wellness experience that integrates extensive facilities, services and customised wellness programs.

The spa experience at the retreat is coupled with wholesome organic food from The Green Table, the spa restaurant. The vegetables and greens are sourced from the in-house organic gardens. This makes the Shillim journey the perfect tryst with wellness. With such unique experiences, Hilton Shillim has joined the elite league of *Healing Hotels of the World*.