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SANCTUARY IN THE CLOUDS

Travelling to the foothills of the Himalayas, Chris Caldicott discovers a wellness retreat a world away from India's usual hustle and bustle



Tall sal trees with long, straight trunks and broad leaves backlit and golden in the morning sun surround Vana like sentinels. Apart from glimpses of Himalayan foothills, there is little sense of place here - none of the colourful chaos of India is allowed past the trees. Vana, Malsi Estate is intentionally a quiet place of luxury, grand design, subtle detail and monastic discipline.

The architecture is achingly contemporary. A vast, light-filled atrium echoes to the calming melodies of a classical flautist. Clean lines created by exposed brick, stone, polished wood and walls of glass lead to interlinking shared spaces.

In your room, you will find treats such as home-made, organic bathroom products specifically chosen to suit your dosha (mind and body type), super-fine organic linen on your bed - just £60 a set in the shop - and your own meditation room.

Vana takes itself very seriously as an iconic wellness retreat and expects its guests to embrace the isolation and purity of the setting, and immerse themselves - without distractions - in one of the treatment programmes it offers.

A vast range is available, from three-day mini retreats offering a mildly

spiritual version of 'me time', including massage, yoga and diet, to full-on, 28-day, potentially life-changing programmes, such as the Ayurvedic Panchakarma, which involves an intense detox diet and a rigorous regime. I chose a three-day Tibetan Healing retreat.

All programmes start with a medical consultation, mine was with Avilocchan, who felt my pulse, looked deep into my eyes and made an eerily accurate summary of my medical past and lifestyle.

My treatments - of *ku nye*, a four-handed medicinal oil massage, and *dhugs*, being gently pummelled with warm and cold compresses of Tibetan herbs - were impressively therapeutic. I was less keen on the bath with a giant tea bag of herbs that had the aroma of wet mud. By day three, though, I wished I had booked a seven-day package. I was just beginning to relax and get into the Vana rhythm and, despite eating three delicious meals a day, was losing

weight fast. The secret seemed to be plenty of small courses using carefully chosen ingredients and twice-daily yoga sessions. Despite having a hint of rehab clinic about it and zero tolerance for deviation from your programme, Vana feels much more like a serene sanctuary in the clouds than a boot camp.



FROM TOP An Indian yoga session is part of Vana's treatment programme. The outdoor infinity-edge pool

WAYS AND MEANS

Chris Caldicott travelled as a guest of Greaves Travel (020-7487 9111; www.greavesindia.co.uk), which offers a nine-night trip from £3,299, including eight nights at Vana, Malsi Estate on a full-board basis with arrival consultation, one daily 75-minute treatment and complimentary twice-daily yoga.