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Monkey business and meditation in India Find peace and relaxation at Himalayan yoga resort

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By Becca Hensley - Special to the Austin American-Statesman

When a monkey the size of a toddler sneaks into my room to steal apples, I have a moment. Maybe it's the curry from the night before, but I swear he's the part-simian Hindu god Hanuman, come to pull blossoms and petals into the air and turn the sky I see outside my window a scorching, sizzling red. He jumps up on my chair and natters at me.

I'm at Ananda in the Himalayas, one of the world's premier yoga and Ayurveda retreats, 100 acres of garden on a hill hovering over the undulating Ganges and the sacred city of Rishikesh in northeast India. Majestic, snow-capped peaks pierce the horizon behind. This is the city the Beatles made famous with their pilgrimage to practice under their master, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, back in the day, set in a region known as the birthplace of yoga.



KEVIN GARRETT

The Indian art of mehndi refers to the intricate application of henna tattoos on the hands and feet, often as adornment ... [Read More](#)

Yes, the staff at Ananda – who also utter “namaskar” (a greeting made with hands held at the heart in prayer and meaning: “I bow to the divine in you”) at every turn – have warned me of the perspicacity of monkeys. “Lock your door, mum,” they have said. I thought I had. But still that white-faced fellow enters and we engage in our own scene from a romantic comedy. Eyes meet, dialogue begins. The problem is that I've been reading the Ramayana, where the monkey-like deity Hanuman aids Lord Rama in his expedition against the world's evil forces. So, I wait for this monkey to do something magical, like reach for the sun because he thinks it's a mango. Instead, he shrieks – did he say namaskar? – and runs out the balcony door he'd left ajar.

I decide it's a sign. My stay at Ananda will include a modicum of monkey

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business – that is, a laid-back release from my daily toils. Now, I'll ponder the deeper meaning while listening to my heart. That's something others have done at Ananda – people you've heard about, like Oprah Winfrey and Prince Charles. It isn't hard here. This is a place awash in fantastical elements, a spot where anything might happen. Wild elephants wander the plain below, tigers roam nearby and the rare flying fox, which resembles a floating blanket when airborne, soars from pine trees to earth at dusk. A profusion of peacocks adorn the grounds, part of a Maharajah's regal estate.

Wearing freshly pressed kurtas (pajama-like yoga clothes delivered each day to our room), my fellow guests and I purposefully engage the days: taking yoga classes in an outdoor amphitheater, meditating on slips of green grass under the tutelage of a spiritual adviser, attending optional lectures and reveling in the spa. We must look a bit like cult members, but there's a liberation in wearing this uniform, a blast of white light that marks us as seekers.

Rishikesh and the surrounding expanses, including Ananda's landscape, have been a pilgrimage destination for eons, touted for a mystical energy that legend says comes from centuries of yogis leaving something behind after practicing here. I feel it in the blood orange sunrise, in the birdsong and in the harmony of so many disparate voices in chant.



Part of Ananda resort, the Maharaja of Tehri Garhwal's palace commands attention and holds the hotel's reception and one guest suite. ... [Read More](#)

"The mind is clouded with thousands of thoughts," says Shanant Pandey, director of Ananda's yoga program and my meditation instructor. "The point is to find clarity, to use meditation to keep the mind fit."

I sit with him on a number of occasions during my weeklong stay, refining my technique and learning new ways to enter mindfulness – such as chakra shuddhi, a mental process that deliberately cleanses the chakras.

One-on-one meditation classes and

group meditation are integral parts of a stay at Ananda, where guests are urged to linger for at least a week for full benefits.

Ayurveda, India's thousands-of-years-old science of wellness and healing, begins with determining your dosha, or mind/body type, believed to be composed of the five elements: space, air, fire, water and earth.

Each guest starts a stay at Ananda with an Ayurvedic doctor who determines an individual program based on whether they are Vata, Pitta, Kapha or a combination. Goals, from detox to renewal to relaxation, are set. Airy and fiery at once, I am Vata-Pitta, and what I really want to take home is a sense of grounding, something that's hard to achieve when one travels as much as I do.



Ananda in the Himalayas' complimentary daily yoga classes are held in various parts of the 100-acre property. One popular spot, the ... [Read More](#)

With nearly 80 treatments offered at the multi-tiered, tranquil spa, Ananda draws not just from Ayurveda but from Tibetan lore and western techniques. My program mixes and matches the modalities, and I glean as much from Ayurvedic Shirodhara as a Tibetan massage ritual that uses hot Himalayan salt poultices infused with cardamom, lavender and jatamansi across the body in measured, slow

taps. A Rose Quartz Facial utilizes crystals energized in the Ganges River and the essential oils of sandalwood, rose and aloe vera. Many treatments begin and end with a blessing or prayer sung in harmony by multiple therapists. Scheduled around the complimentary Ananda activities, from yoga to hikes to hydrotherapy pools, my spa time is the highlight of my stay.

Not a place of privation, Ananda follows the Ayurvedic mantra that there are no rules, only suggestions. Part of what guests here learn about their dosha is how to achieve balance and what symptoms, from rashes to angry outbursts to inability to concentrate, might convey an out-of-kilter system. They discover what to do to re-establish equilibrium. Much of that can be achieved via diet, according to Ayurveda, and when and what people ought to eat **varies according to their unique composition.** At Ananda's restaurant, guests can order from a wellness menu matched to their dosha or choose to gobble up Indian cuisine (from roti to saag to dosa), international specialties or salads from their organic garden **laid out in an elaborate buffet.** **There's Indian Kingfisher Beer and Indian Sula Sauvignon Blanc wine for those intent on indulging** – and I do. And nobody judges.

My last morning, a troop of monkeys gather on a rooftop above the terrace where I eat breakfast. They gaze hungrily at my fruit plate **and toast, poised to spring, should I leave my food unattended.** It's then that I remember that Hanuman's best known for making the greatest leap ever taken, a jump that took him from the southern tip of India to Sri Lanka. That's why hatha yoga's monkey pose is a yogic version of the splits, recalling a leap of faith.



An Ananda staff member poses; behind him is a landscape that includes the holy Ganges River, the village of Rishikesh and ... [Read More](#)

And that's what a stay at Ananda turns out to be – a leap into well-being, a visit packed with knowledge to jump-start your new beginning, an inward journey into your soul. And a monkey nattering about shiny apples and golden sunlight.

IF YOU GO

Stay: Ananda in the Himalayas is a destination spa worth the long flight to India. Sign up for one of the Wellness Experience Packages, from Weight Management to Renewal.

www.anandaspa.com.

Do: Combine a trip to Ananda with a longer trek through India. Outfitter Micato Safaris can organize an itinerary that takes you from Mumbai to Kerala to Jaipur, bookending your adventure with a stay at Ananda. micatosafaris.com.

Don't miss: Ganga Aarti, a ceremony at sundown on the banks of the Ganges, which involves the lighting of lamps as a demonstration of illumination and truth.

Take home: Upon checkout, you'll receive a kalava, a sacred, red thread tied around your wrist after a blessing. Its presence will remind you of your experience for days to come.

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