

What you thought you couldn't do you can, what you thought you couldn't be you can, the only limiting factor is your belief.

# Satsang Sunrise...

DEBBIE KINDNESS

# a yoga retreat, holiday in Kerala, India

*The Ashram rules state: Attendance at Satsang, asana classes, karma yoga and lecture is mandatory. And consumption of meat, fish, egg, and alcohol is not allowed in the ashram.*

What? I thought that I was on vacation. A yoga vacation aimed at stressed, overworked foreigners, like myself, looking to do some yoga and meditation in a tropical paradise.

Having just finished escorting a tour around colourful, bustling North India, a week of doing nothing but stretching the body and calming the mind sounded like just what I needed before heading back to reality.

But this was no beach holiday. The reality was that this was a working Ashram and there were rules and regulations that challenged some of your beliefs and values along the way - not necessarily a bad thing. Checking in at the Ashram I was handed a set of sheets, pillow

and mosquito net and asked to sign an acknowledgement of the Ashram rules in order to be allowed to be part of the yoga program.

The Ashram day began at 6am with a gentle awakening at the morning satsang. At 8am, with a glass of chai for sustenance, the first yoga asana class of the day began. With a choice of beginners or intermediate class to attend, we would breathe, relax, stretch, twist, hold, bend and stretch some more as we'd learn and improve our yoga practice. Then we would do it all over again in the afternoon. This was of course my favourite part of Ashram life - what I had come for. Sivananda yoga was simple, and as for classic hatha yoga - there were no bells or whistles there. It concentrated purely on benefiting the mind, body and soul.

Every evening at 8pm, lights were dimmed and my fellow attendees and I would quietly enter the spacious meditation hall and make ourselves comfortable for the satsang. Sitting cross legged on reed mats we would commence with a half hour of meditation followed by chanting and singing intended to raise the energy level of

the group. Bhakti, or devotional yoga, wasn't my thing - I was really just there for the yoga. However despite my internal dialogue squirming and little voices asking, "what would my friends and family think"? Surprisingly I really began to enjoy the chanting. By letting go I succumbed to the vibrations of the energy created thus enhancing my overall experience.

Although the routine was fixed sometimes we did have a change of scene. As each day was completed with the evening Satsang, mornings also began with meditation and chanting. One morning, we had a silent walking meditation to the lake to experience the magic of seeing the sunrise over the rolling misty hills. It was truly a wow moment and one that will stay with me forever.

We also had daily karma yoga, the idea being to carry out the duties given with no attachment - neither enjoyment nor dislike. You could find yourself scrubbing the loos or slicing pineapples in the cafe. My job was to set up the hall for the nightly satsang. I felt kind of good about that - I guess I was attached.

Located in Gods own country, Kerala - South India, the Ashram served up fantastic local pure vegetarian fare. To concentrate our mind and body to physically perform four hours of asanas each day, a good diet was essential. Sattvic food, which contains no stimulating ingredients, such as garlic or onion, yet remains surprisingly tasty, is based on traditional Ayurvedic principles. In fact the Ashram, being built around what was once an Ayurvedic hospital, still has an Ayurvedic centre and resident doctor.

Ashram life quickly fell into a routine. I was excited to learn that in addition to Ayurvedic massages for just \$10, there was a laundry lady. And, oh excitement, a cafe which dished up herbal teas, juices and healthy snacks.

I was amazed at the diversity of my fellow vacationers who hailed from Britain, Canada, Italy, Portugal, Austria, Iran and Spain to name a few, and of course India. I immediately clicked with my Danish room-mate who soon became my partner in crime. Skipping the occasional lecture or class to indulge our coffee addiction in the nearby village,

then sneaking back into the Ashram (like giggling school girls). After all, rules are meant to be broken.

Situated by the picturesque shore of a large dam, the Ashram really was a slice of heaven. In our spare time we'd head down to the dam to relax in the balmy waters, despite the sign advising, "swimming prohibited - crocodile". The waters of the dam were crystal clear with absolutely no sign of crocs.

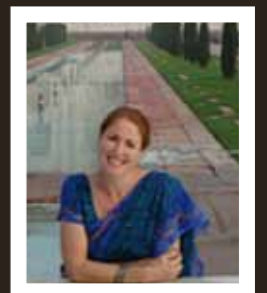
By the end of the two weeks, my sore overstretched muscles and ligaments had come to grips with four hours of yoga asanas every day, and my lotus was coming along just nicely. Far more than the physical changes, I realised how I'd slowed down and relaxed. Back in Delhi for a day before I caught my plane home, I felt completely unperturbed by the chaos and mayhem of the city and experienced an overwhelming sense of tranquillity I'm still managing to hold on to now - a few weeks since returning.

So, a yoga vacation in India sounds like the kind of holiday with a difference your body, mind and soul is craving? If so, get ready for a complete experience

that will challenge you in many ways and be far more rewarding than you can possibly imagine. This is so much more than a holiday. It's not always easy, nor is it always enjoyable, but you will come away with a life experience that your whole being will thank you for.

For more information on Yoga Vacations, visit <http://www.sivananda.org/ndam/index.html>.

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