

Restoring balance

Delve deep into the ancient Ayurvedic tradition
without forgoing the pleasures and conveniences
of a luxury hotel stay

by Freya Purnell



(opposite) Yoga therapy in action; a two-bedroom Water Suite at Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru



“Ayurveda is about learning how to utilise the natural energies and aspects of the universe to help yourself”

- Dr Shylesh Subramanya

Purification and purging are not words that typically accompany an island holiday – at least, you might hope they won’t. But with its comprehensive wellness offering, the Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru, in the Baa Atoll of the Maldives, provides access to intensive protocols without sacrificing the comforts you might be accustomed to. Gone is the need to choose health retreat or holiday – here you can have your cake and eat it, too (well, maybe ...).

The ancient Indian ‘science of life’, Ayurveda, is gaining popularity in the wellness world as a way of regaining lost vitality. Our Western penchant for eating and drinking too much, sleeping and exercising too little and embracing stress like a long-lost cousin has many looking for ways to stop disease in its tracks, or at least, return a spring to their step. With the aim of bringing the body back into balance, Ayurveda is a holistic methodology prescribing a combination of treatments, exercise, diet and lifestyle modifications that can, it is hoped, be maintained in everyday life.

Dr Shylesh Subramanya, director of the Spa and Ayurvedic Retreat at Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru (fourseasons.com/maldiveslg), says: “A collective way of understanding Ayurveda and holistic health is it’s not just about healing yourself, but learning how to utilise the natural energies and aspects of the universe to help yourself: the elements, ingredients, breathing correctly, meditation, anything.”

Perhaps the most hardcore component on offer is the practice of *panchakarma*. Meaning ‘five therapies’ in Sanskrit, it is a detoxification and cleansing program

conducted over two to three weeks. Tailored to the needs of each guest, it can combine taking medicines, colon cleansing, enemas and nasal procedures. Prices for the program start from £1670 per room per night, including meals, seaplane transfers, consultations, spa treatments and herbal medicines.

It might be effective, but according to those in the know, it’s not pretty – vomiting and diarrhoea are common, as the body expels nasties. Panchakarma is a process offered extensively in hospitals and clinics in India, but according to Dr Subramanya, the resort is the only major luxury hotel to offer such a serious Ayurvedic immersion.

“We go very deep,” he says. “Most of the time we tell people to come alone, or if their partner comes, they should also be involved in the program.”

The 44-acre island of Landaa Giraavaru, which is about 40 minutes by seaplane from Maldivian capital Malé, is covered with lush jungle and sandy paths. Even without dipping into the wellness offerings, tearing around the island on the cruiser bikes provided to all guests, as fruit bats fly overhead and the coconut palms sway gently, makes you feel decades younger than when you arrived.

Guest rooms ring the island – at one end, overwater villas and water suites (starting from around £1200 a night including breakfast for two) jut into the lagoon, while at the other, oceanfront bungalows and beach villas offer plunge pools, direct beach access and outdoor living areas peppered with day beds, including a sea-view loft made for lazing (rates start at £1050 a night). The apex of the accommodations is the two-storey, three-bedroom Landaa Estate – offering

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8600 square feet of interior space and 21,500 square feet outdoors, including a private beach, two pools, a stargazing lounge and 24-hour staffing (starting from £13,630 a night).

The Ayurvedic Spa and Retreat, named 'Destination Retreat of the Year' in the 2015 AsiaSpa awards and adding more industry and media awards since, is a three-acre complex at the island's centre, combining treatment rooms, some over water; a herb garden from which medicinal compounds are prepared; and yoga decks and pavilions. The primordial sound of 'om' emanates from hidden speakers throughout the complex; the chant denoting the area as sacred.

One can understand the attractions of dealing with the perhaps unpleasant side effects of detoxification in a place where iced water and cool, essential oil-infused towels appear whenever you pause for more than a moment.

Dr Subramanya says the commitment required to travel to the Maldives – from the UK, at least a 10-hour flight – means that many guests stay at least a week, making it easier to commit to a wellness program for at least a portion of their time on the island.

For guests interested in Ayurvedic wellness, a *panchakarma* program is by no means the only option – and its

intensity means that it is discouraged for first-timers. The wellness starting point for guests is, in fact, a complimentary consultation with one of the resort's Ayurvedic physicians.

The foundation of Ayurveda is an assessment of an individual's *dosha*, imperfectly translated as body type, but which considers aspects of physicality, constitution and personality. The three *doshas* – *kapha*, *pitta* and *vata* – correspond roughly to the elements of earth, fire and water, and individuals typically have a dominant and secondary *dosha*. The aim of Ayurveda is to bring the three into balance for optimum health. Once guests have their 'prescription', eating in the resort's restaurants – of which there are four – is simple, as menus carry *dosha*-specific food labelling. A wealth of delicious juices, smoothies and fruit crushes also make it easy to sidestep boozy cocktails in favour of healthier drinking options.

On the Ayurvedic spa menu are individual treatments such as *Abhyanga* oil massage; three- to seven-day Ayurvedic remedies (priced at around £935 to £1750), such as the rejuvenating *Rasayana*, which promises to help "slow the ageing process, improve memory and intelligence, maximise physical endurance and sexual prowess, strengthen the sense organs

and brighten the complexion"; and longer Ayurvedic immersions that focus on diet, exercise and sleep.

Emerging from the same Vedic tradition as Ayurveda, yoga plays a central role in the wellness program at Landaa Giraavaru. It appears on the program in many forms – aqua yoga, especially helpful for those carrying a large amount of weight or with joint problems; the more run-of-the-mill morning vinyasa or hatha yoga; and anti-gravity yoga, in which participants contort in acrobatic poses and hang upside down from silky hammocks, held in place only by some strategically twisted fabric. Beneficial for those with back pain, the inversion tractions the spine. It's hard to say whether the post-yoga high comes from the literal rush of blood to the head, the terror of sliding out of the silky cocoon head-first onto the deck, or the exhilaration of impersonating a trapeze artist, but it is certainly invigorating.

An 'Evening Enlightenment' class, incorporating different types of *pranayama* breathing exercises, stretching and guided meditation is perfectly timed to watch the Tiffany blue of the ocean transform as the sun sets over the endless horizon – so uninterrupted the curvature of the earth is visible.

Requiring more commitment on the fitness front is the Yoga Energy Trail. Over 75 minutes, an instructor leads guests through 15 stations on a two-mile route around the island, including aerial yoga, strengthening and stretching exercises, breathing exercises and even bouncing on a trampoline. Jogging through the humid, jungly environs and taking on physical challenges is like being on *Survivor* in all the best ways, but it's not an activity for the faint-hearted or fitness-challenged.

Dr Subramanya says the centre now plans to extend its yoga offering into a therapeutic context with a new yoga therapy program. Devised by Dr Umesh Dwivedi, a PhD-qualified yoga from S-VYASA, India's leading yoga therapy research institute, courses are targeted at specific health conditions including thyroid dysfunction, diabetes, addiction, and hormonal imbalance. Participants complete five sessions over four days to learn how to use yoga as a tool in their daily life to manage these health issues.

There is certainly an emphasis on natural health throughout the Landaa Giraavaru spa, right down to the *ila* organic bath products and practitioner-only Ayurvedic remedies, but Four Seasons also cannily recognises that, sometimes, restoring youthfulness can use a more high-

tech helping hand. This is provided in the form of non-invasive transdermal facials, in which serums are forcefully ‘blown’ into the skin, and Verju Body Contouring, using a laser to break up fat cells.

One of the great advantages of the resort’s wellness offering is that the island has many activities to keep the spa-averse, family members and travelling companions busy – from stand-up paddleboarding, kitesurfing and fishing, to getting up close and personal with turtles in the rehabilitation centre, scuba diving and swimming with manta rays in the UNESCO-declared World Biosphere Reserve in which the island is located. And coupled with the sun, sea and sand, quiet time to contemplate the endless blue might just be the medicine to cure all that ails you.



Wellness for water babies

The Four Seasons’ Maldives Kuda Huraa (fourseasons.com/maldiveskh), Landaa Giraavaru’s smaller sister property in North Malé Atoll, draws inspiration from its marine environment to guide its wellness offering. The island is a mecca for surfers, due to its proximity to the legendary Sultans reef break, and even a visit to the Island Spa requires a trip across the water in a traditional *dhoni*.

The spa uses organic OSEA seaweed-based products, and the seven open-air, overwater treatment rooms each have a ‘porthole’ viewing window under the massage tables, allowing guests to watch tropical fish and reef sharks in the ocean during their treatment.

The signature spa treatment, the Kuda Huraa Healing Waters massage, incorporates aquatic elements in a truly unique experience – as you lie face-up on a heated water-filled mattress, the therapist uses long, palm-up strokes, working with the body’s own weight, to relax tense muscles, combined with gentle rocking, creating the sensation of being on a boat. As the waves crash in the background, ultimate relaxation is a foregone conclusion. **RR**



(opposite) Anti-gravity yoga; (from top) an Ayurvedic oil treatment; room with a view; the Kuda Huraa Island Spa

