



Call to HEAL

A yoga retreat in Kerala rejuvenates the body and sharpens the mind, finds *Nicholas Shakespeare*

I am standing in white cotton pyjamas, balanced on one leg, looking out over a lagoon. The air is humid, full of birdsong and distant chanting. On the grass causeway an egret walks between the legs of a grazing cow, straight-backed and slender as if it, too, has been to yoga with Sonali Sibal.

I had known of Sonali as a mysterious Indian yoga teacher based in Oxford about whom friends talked with proprietorial restraint — like a secret they wanted to keep to themselves. About wellness in general I had the ignorant scepticism of a stereotypical Englishman towards Goop-infused Ayurvedic practices.

I'm here in Kerala in India's south-west with Sonali at the instigation of my wife, Gillian. Our group of six is divided evenly into three devotees, like Gillian, and two fellow sceptics like me: Sheru, an Indian-born dermatologist from Beaconsfield, and



Coconut Lagoon and, left, houseboats in Kerala

Alketa, a doctor from Milan. Before arriving at our base, Coconut Lagoon, Sheru summed up his preconception of yoga and its sister science Ayurveda as 'basically stretching exercises and perfumed massages'.

We land in Kochi, the spice capital of the world. Not until I see a cargo boat steam past our waterfront hotel, with 'Malabar 2' on its prow, do I realise we are on the Malabar Coast, the title of a briefly famous poem by my grandfather, which begins: 'I remember a great sea breaking on grey sands / And cocoanut palms that came down nearly to the water.'

We spend the next three days exploring Kochi through the informed lens of Sonali, sampling alternative examples, as it were, of the spiritual and the restorative. We visit the oldest synagogue in India. We go

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St Francis Church in Kochi and, inset, Sonali Sibal

to St Francis Assisi Cathedral, where Vasco da Gama was originally buried; and we visit a tea plantation in the Cardamon Hills, the camellia assamica bushes forming a jigsaw of vibrant green mattresses laid out in a vertical crazy paving. With infusions of white tea, these offerings pave the way for our wellness yoga retreat on Vembanad Lake.

Like Venice, the resort of Coconut Lagoon lies in a setting approachable only from the water. Surrounded by tall palms, the 50 bungalows are built on reclaimed land divided by a network of small canals. I watch two men up to their waists clearing silt and packing the banks to let the water flow in one of them. The image captures the treatment we're shortly to receive, which aims, in Sonali's words, 'to clear our energy channels'.

As unique in her way as the setting and an invisible spirit behind everything, Sonali is the reason we're here: an authentic bridge between the Western mind and the culture in which she grew up — 'living yoga from the age of seven'. Her great-uncle was the legendary Bengali guru, Sri Aurobindo, and her paternal grandfather in Delhi gave Sonali her first lessons. Later in Rishikesh by the Ganges she met a guru who recognised that she was born to teach. She has been doing so for the past 15 years in London and Oxford. 'For me, it's not only my gift; it's a calling and a service, and I feel it's my duty to share it.' She explains her gift like this: 'When you see a child fall and graze themselves, you run and touch their knee and the child gets up and runs off. In yoga, you are doing the same to

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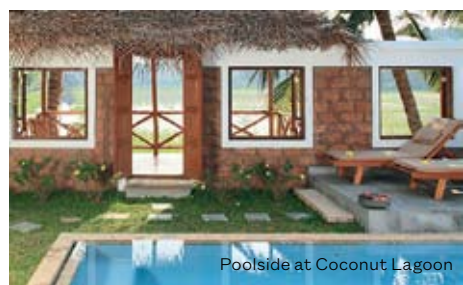
yourself because your body has the power to heal. The guru is guiding you to yourself.'

Like Aurobindo — who pioneered Integral Yoga as 'a path to transcend from lower emotions to your higher self' — she braids together yoga with massage, meditation, marma therapy and dance. This fusion is what makes her uncommon and sought-after. A Paris-based social entrepreneur in our group has been on five of Sonali's retreats and says Sonali only has to look at you to intuit where your body is weak — then she assists you in mending it. 'It's a clean-up. Every nook and cranny is oiled, perfumed, dusted and you feel you have added several years to your life — not any years, but good years. You've got rid of your emotional and physical junk.'

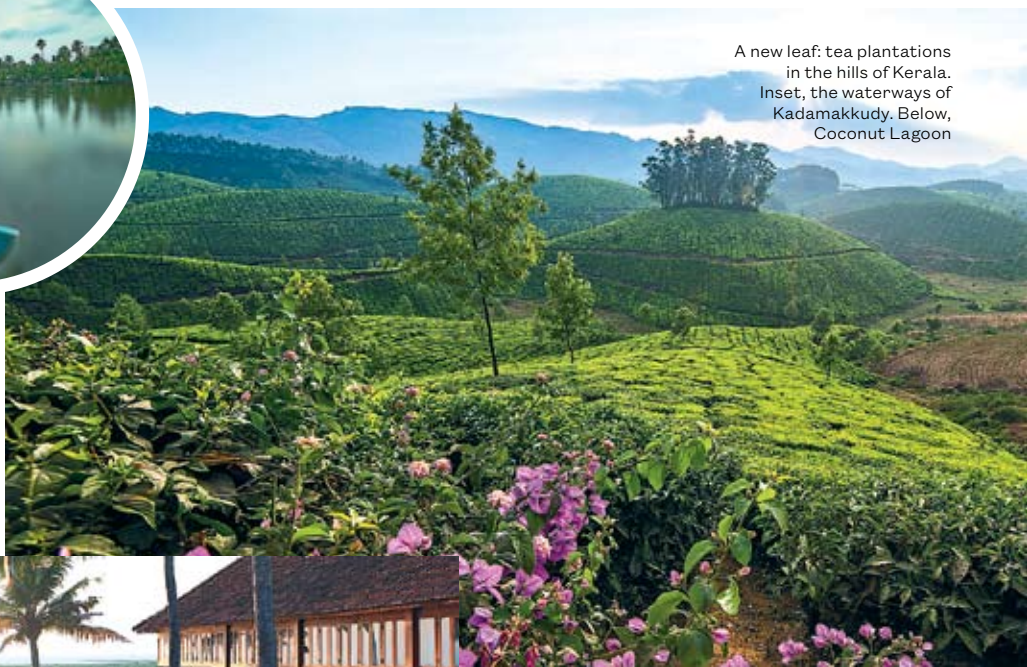
Our 12-day treatment is a fusion of the spiritual and the physical. It begins over a teak bridge at the resort's Ayurvedic Centre. In order to determine my treatment, I must know my constitution. Thirty questions later — Am I combative? How thick are my eyebrows? How fast do I walk? etc — I am judged a 'kapha', or water-based personality. I'm quite curious. I tell 'the Master', as the centre's head is known, that my grandfather was a professional dowser in northern India, where Ayurveda began 5,000 years ago (and where my father was born), and as a child I had a small talent for water-divining. Might there be a connection to my 'kapha' body type?

'Yes,' he smiles inscrutably, 'though the evidence is not yet there.'

The Master, Suresh Pankajakshan, is widely known for his ability to cure old sporting injuries through marma therapy, a form of deep-pressure massage — similar to acupuncture — of our marma or vital points. The previous year, the Paris entrepreneur went to him with a knee



Poolside at Coconut Lagoon



A new leaf: tea plantations in the hills of Kerala. Inset, the waterways of Kadamakkudy. Below, Coconut Lagoon



"FOR THE FIRST TIME IN YEARS MY BODY FEELS RECOGNISED, UNIGNORED, WAKENED"

injury. 'He played guitar on the back of my knee. I got down from the table and I put my leg down, braced for pain, and there was no pain.' This time he cures the Italian doctor Alketa of a longstanding ache in her lower back caused by whiplash from a car accident. 'Before, I had to use my whole body to turn. Now if I move my neck... have a look.'

Twice a day to release my toxins, two young masseurs, Agas and Nidhin, give me a kapha-based rejuvenation massage with oils. They begin with a chant I came across first in TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* — 'Shanti Shanti Shanti'. They use medicated coconut oil for my head, sesame oil for my body. Halfway through each massage I drink a small glass of warm clarified butter. A steam bath follows — a wooden cupboard with handles, like something to keep cheese in. Afterwards Agas smears me with herbal soap, washes me down with warm satinwood water and towels me dry.

Sonali tops and tails these sessions with a yoga lesson for our group. I absorb her ancient wisdom as if it's an oil. For the first time in years my poor body feels recognised, unignored, wakened. My mind,



too, feels sharpened, connected, italicised. She says, 'It really is about oiling you from the inside out.'

That's not all. After 12 days I have lost 14 pounds while Alketa has lost nine pounds. 'I can move my legs much better. It makes me positive in everything.' Sheru, an insomniac, also is feeling lighter, fitter, more reflective. 'Guess what happened last night. I slept for five hours! Last time? Oh, 25 years ago. And I don't feel tired.' He says of his unanticipated transformation: 'In the fusion of disparate elements, it's as if two and two makes five.'

To the Paris entrepreneur, the last word. 'It's so healing. You would be foolish not to do everything in your power to come back. When was the last time anybody washed you? It makes you want to weep. You're always taking care of people you love — children, husband, dying parents. It's fine, it's something I enjoy.' She drops her voice to a whisper. 'But to have someone take care of you, it's just heaven.'

Sonali's next wellness yoga retreat at Coconut Lagoon is 9-21 September.

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