DHARANA WELLNESS CENTRE, HILTON SHILLIM ESTATE, INDIA

February 13, 2020

Travelling has always been something I love, and spending too much time in one place gives me itchy feet to explore anywhere else, be it the Surrey hills or half way across the world. For a long time, I have wanted to visit India. The cuisine is one of my favourites, focusing heavily on vegetables and plant-based foods, exquisitely flavoured and perfectly balanced.

I recently had the privilege of being able to travel to the Dhahran Wellness Centre (part of the Hilton Shillim estate near Mumbai), partly as a birthday present to my partner, and partly for work. With its focus on wellness and conservation, I knew it was the perfect fit!

Shillim was originally a conservation project by two brothers, who bought land to protect it from slash-and-burn, the practise of cutting down forests and burning them in the summer to create more fertile land for agriculture. Over time the brothers were able to buy and reforest more and more pieces of adjacent land. Now the site is around 3000 acres, within which sits the 330 acre eco retreat (of which 70 acres is the wellness facility).

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Location & accommodation

We travelled from another local retreat, but the drive from Mumbai airport is around 3 hours. It's long considering the distance, but compared to some of the other local roads, the journey was smooth and seamless! The hotel provides airport transfers for a fee.

The surrounding forests are what make this retreat so special for me. It creates a supremely idyllic setting, somewhat more humid than the surrounding areas, and brimming with local wildlife. The rooms are tucked away off the road that winds through the centre of the site, and thanks to the fact that they are all low-rise, all of them are quite well hidden in the forest. We were lucky enough to be placed in one of their pool villas, although all the rooms look spectacular – the spa villas have beautiful balconies with views over the surrounding valley.

The villa was gorgeous and spacious, sleeping 2-3 (a spare bed can be added on request). Ours had a private pool and was situated close to the wellness centre – perfect for guests on any wellness programme.

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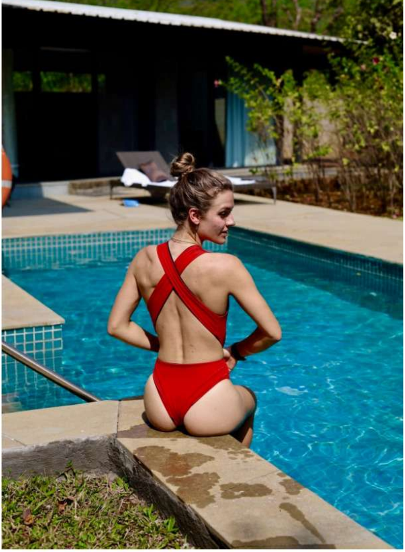
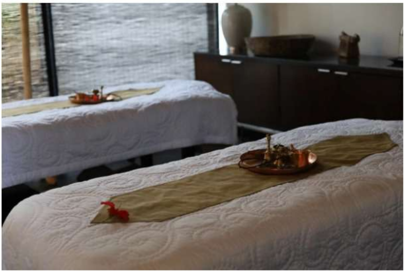


Not a bad place to enjoy the sunshine! Swimsuit from Davy J

Wellness programme

Dharana seeks to help guests reconnect with nature and their bodies thorough a range of wellness programmes. Whether your stay is 3 nights or 2 weeks, programmes are available for all health goals.

Each stay commences with a questionnaire (completed in advance) and a Ayureveda/naturopathy consultation to determine the best diet, treatments and activities each guest should take on. Once drawn out, the guest is given a daily plan complete with activities, massages, treatments etc., and after the stay there is a departure consultation aiming to provide each guest with simple steps to continue the dharana way of life at home (both dietary recommendations and naturopathic suggestions).



Treatments are incredibly varied and are planned for you after your initial consultation

Since both Fiann and I already eat healthily and enjoy staying active, our programme was focussed around relaxation (plenty of treatments), increasing focus and enjoying the nature reserve. I couldn't think of anything better!

Food

One of my favourite parts of travelling is the food! However, in the past I have struggled with 'healthy' or 'wellness' menus, which provide watered-down versions of dishes, or portions so small they are finished before you know what's happened. Thankfully, after speaking with our doctor, we were assured that the food would be healthy, but in line with our desires – that is to say delicious, traditional and filling.

The food was incredible – one of my favourites was the traditional (but healthified) thali

The food certainly did not disappoint. Although the individual dishes were sometimes smaller than I would help myself to (not hard, considering my normal portion sizes), I never came away from a meal feeling like I hadn't had enough. In fact, I was full for almost our entire stay! This was some of the best food I have ever eaten and a wonderful introduction to all the dishes India has to offer!

My favourite breakfast was dosa and paratha

One thing I would say is that if you want traditional, large, ghee-filled Indian meals, this isn't the place – the meals are delicious but delicate. In the Green Table, the dharana (wellness) restaurant, traditional ingredients are cooked using modern culinary knowledge to create traditional-tasting food based on Ayurevedic traditions with modern-day health benefits. All I know is that it tastes blooming amazing.

The hotel has one more restaurant, Terrazzo, which serves a combination of Indian and global cuisine. We ate here once (from the buffet) and it was delicious, but does not compare to the home-grown, fine dining feel of the Green Table. However, if you're looking for somewhere that serves alcohol or coffee, this is your place (or head to the Mountain Bar & Bistro – bruschetta pictured below). The Green Table is for wholesome ingredients only!

The Green Table gets many of its ingredients from its on-site organic farm (complete with friendly farm cat).

Activities

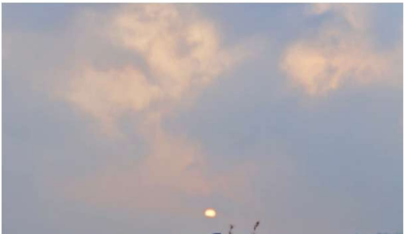
Hike to Shillim peak – we hiked up in 18 minutes and ran down in 9!

You can also practise yoga on the peak

I was amazed when I found out that most of the activities held at Dharana are privately run. From bird-watching to block painting or pottery, if you choose to sign up you can guarantee a personalised feel. We loved every single activity we tried – I'll let the photos speak for themselves, but so you know, we did:

- Forest Bathing
- Birding trail
- Sunrise hike
- Hike to shillim peak (above)
- Cycling trail (below)
- Block painting (below)

Our only problem is that we didn't stay longer! We heard about a 6 hour hike on our penultimate day, but didn't have time to fit it in, which was a real shame!



TARGET
FIREFOX

We cycled at 6:30am to see the sunrise!

Our birding trail didn't just involve birds!

I adored our stay at the Dharana Wellness Centre, and would love to go back for longer after the rainy season sometime, where the activities are focussed around the rejuvenated forests, waterfalls and rivers. I can imaging coming back here over and over again and never getting bored, which is what I now plan to do!

Have you ever been to India? Would you like to visit somewhere like this? Comment below!

Too many photos, not enough space

This trip was very kindly gifted by Hilton Shillim Estate, but as always all views are my own.

nb/ I offset my total carbon footprint from general living monthly, and offset the flights from this trip. Although not a perfect alternative to not flying at all, you can read my thoughts on Carbon Offsetting here.

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