



# The quest for sustainable wellness

On the trail of India's ancient healing wisdom, Marie Glad visits an authentic ayurveda clinic in Kerala for a full Panchakarma all-natural detox

Every muscle of my body is relaxing. My city pulse is slowing down. I am being bathed in warm milk and honey by two women. Their movement is rhythmical as they scoop one jug of milk after the other onto my winter pale skin. I am mesmerised by the soothing care and the complete



attention I'm being given. This must be as close as one can get to the life of Cleopatra or Elizabeth I of England.

We have arrived in Kerala, the epicentre of ayurveda at the southern tip of India. It's a gem in a sea of coconut trees. This is where hardcore health travellers and wellness seekers come to cleanse and recharge. Ayurvedic clinics are popping up on every corner along the the coast. A health practice developed over the last 5,000 years is expanding in all directions, and the global community is joining in. We have signed up for a 14-day rejuvenation programme called Panchakarma at Dr Unni's ayurvedic clinic in the beach resort of Kovalam.

The atmosphere is a crossover between authentic Indian and Western comfort. It is stylish and earthy, and affordable compared to the celebrity retreats of Sri Lanka. The reputation of this place is spread through word of mouth. Many Westerners coming here have met Dr Unni Kavirajan (founder, chief physician and managing director) back home. When the monsoon hits Kerala,

he travels in the summer of northern Europe and Scandinavia to give lectures and ayurvedic treatments. Dr Unni and his colleagues are on a mission to bring sustainable wellness to the planet.

## Panchakarma treatments

At the clinic in Kovalam we are spoiled with up to four hours of daily treatments. The morning starts with yoga. Then we meet the doctor for evaluation and diagnosis. For most people arriving here, primary attention is given to the treatment of stress-related diseases. According to ayurveda, which means 'the science of life', we are born with a unique constitution based on genetics and the physical and mental state of our parents during conception. The constitution consists of a combination of the three bio-elements or Doshas called Vata (air), Pitta (fire) and Kapha (earth and water). The Panchakarma programme is tailored to correct any imbalances. I have arrived to sort out an aching back and a sore neck from decades spent slumped over a computer.



Dr Unni tells us: "In most cases people have tried other things before they start ayurveda. They come here because they can't be cured with other medications. Usually we get people with chronic ailments, or people that need rehab after a stroke or cancer treatment. If it is not very chronic we always get good results quickly, as with back and neck problems." This is music to my ears.

The in-house masterpiece is a powerful foot massage that Dr Unni and his team have developed over the last 20 years. It is called Chavutti Thirumal. In the foot massage the whole body is massaged with the feet of the therapist who holds on to a rope suspended from the ceiling, whilst the client relaxes on a mat on the floor. The pressure and movement is more effective than a massage by hand. It opens up the channels of the body and kick-starts the detox of organs and the lymphatic system. The massage oil is a tailored and medicated blend from the family run company, Krishna Pharmacy, founded and managed by Unni's mother, Dr Lalitha Kavirajan.

After the foot massage and an enriching milk bath, dry yellow herbs are deeply massaged into my skin, followed by an intense padding with wet rice bundles. Warm oil is then poured over my forehead in a continuous stream, a technique called Shirodhara, used to calm the nervous system and relieve symptoms of stress, headache and insomnia. I'm finding myself drifting off to sleep and dreaming of peaceful places as the excess oil is wiped off my forehead and a sweet fragrance of saffron reaches my senses. The icing on the cake is a gentle facial massage.

## Healthy living

Kovalam is slightly off season during our visit. There is a certain stillness over the beach resort. The restaurants and cafes are fairly empty. And so is the clinic; we are around 20 people a day. During high season, from November to March, Unni and his team treat over 100 clients a day. Despite the demand he sticks to his principles. In contrast to most 'stationary' doctors Unni engages in body work together with his therapists. I sense a warm respect between them. There is complete presence and dedication to the task. When I ask how a very busy doctor stays healthy he tells me: "Every day after work I spend at least an hour for myself to do yoga, breathing, meditation, to cleanse my whole being before I go home to my family. I learned that you have to spend time on yourself if you





are giving time for people around all day. If you want to speak about health, you have to be healthy yourself.”

The main principle of a healthy lifestyle according to ayurveda is prevention, both physical and emotional. First, you have the daily routines, including things like what time to wake up, what time to eat, what and how much to eat, when to exercise, how long to work, the best way to cleanse the body and when to sleep. Second are the seasonal routines. Summer, autumn, winter and spring are all different. Ayurveda explains how to protect yourself during the seasonal changes, when most people get a flu or fever. Dr Unni explains: “The pillars are food, sleep, exercise and sex. All these are important for the body. But you can kill yourself with that as well. Learn to do it the right way. Avoid over-indulgence or under-indulgence.”

During our stay we meet Chantelle, a delicate French woman in her early 60's. She wears a sparrow tattooed on her ankle

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and used to run a lingerie shop in Paris. Chantelle has not been able to work for nine years due to painful severe rheumatoid arthritis. She tells us that before she arrived to the clinic she used to take over 100 pills a week. Western medicine had no answers for her, other than more pain killers. In a few short weeks of receiving treatment here, Chantelle's pill consumption had dropped to zero. She tells us she feels better than ever and dances around the room showing us the heavy joint clamps that she no longer needs to use. If ever there is proof of the power of ayurvedic medicine it is this woman's smiling face.

## Natural healing

When we are reaching the 10th day of treatments the body and mind are completely relaxed, the channels are open. We have reached the peak-time of detoxification. This part of Panchakarma is not for the faint-hearted. Probably this is when most people would pack their bags and return home. But if you want the full experience of rejuvenation you have to pay the price. Time has come for Vireka and Basti. Three consequent days of purgation, herbal enemas, and rice soup. When the 14th day arrives we are several pounds lighter. It's time to celebrate! We are toned, reborn and upgraded. The whole system, organs and intestinal tract are reset. When I ask if there is anything that ayurveda can't treat Dr Unni responds: “Every disease has a stage when it can be cured, and then it gets to a place where it cannot. Ayurveda is

not like a miracle. But when we do things in the right way everything is a miracle.”

The future looks bright, not only for Chantelle or my neck, but also for ayurveda in general. To raise awareness of natural therapies, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who starts his day with yoga, established a new Ministry for Yoga, Ayurveda and Naturopathy. The aim is to use scientific research to validate the traditional medicine systems and combine them with the best of modern medicine. Modi's vision is to make India a leader for affordable, holistic healthcare for the world. Whenever he meets foreign prime ministers on his travels he takes the opportunity to preach about the benefits of yoga and ayurveda.

But as much as ayurveda is about personal miracles, it's about healing the planet and bringing nature back to humanity. Dr Unni has a global vision: “Ayurveda teaches us how to live in harmony with our surroundings and how to create an environment that really supports us. It gives us the message that we are all part of the universe. When mankind comes to that understanding we all will survive in a beautiful way. When we live in harmony with nature everything is balanced.”

Like Chantelle we leave Kerala with the gratitude for what we have discovered, a commitment to spread the word, and a promise to return. ॐ

*For more information on Dr Unni and for bookings, visit: [unnidoc.com](http://unnidoc.com)*

