

Condé Nast Traveller

SPONSORED BY
Healing  Holidays

THE WORLD MADE LOCAL

Wellness & Spa Guide 2026



THE WORLD'S BEST SPAS • A MEDI-CLINIC TAKE ON GLP-1 • DEMENTIA DIAGNOSTICS
WELLNESS GOES ON SAFARI • THE LONGEVITY CRÈME DE LA CRÈME • HOW TO FIND PEACE 

Shedding skin

HORATIO CLARE DODGES COBRAS AND EMBRACES
AYURVEDA AT INDIA'S DHARANA AT SHILLIM



PHOTOGRAPHS: ROBB AARON GORDON; DHARANA AT SHILLIM

A moment of calm. *Opposite:*
the Shillim Estate



Clockwise from this picture:
Forest Villa; dish at The Green
Table; Forest Villa bedroom, all
at Dharana at Shillim



“SQUEEZE YOUR GLUTES!” cries personal trainer Arzaan Bagwan. “Shoulders back and down, engage your core!” Beyond the huge gym windows, Maharashtra is waking to another green-gold morning of bulbul birdsong and mooching mongooses. Every day is like summer, at the end of this long monsoon season. The great green Tranquility Pool and the smaller pools in the gardens of the guest villas are still. An Indian pond heron comes daily to eat frogs drowned overnight; like everyone else here, it is a model of discretion and efficiency. From the peaks of the Sahyadri mountains, crests of the Western Ghats which loom dramatically above us, the Vavali stream flows down to the lake-like Purna reservoir. Guide Pralhad Bodake and I enjoy a magical walk along it one afternoon; the least strange thing I do during this remarkable stay.

After a four-hour trip from Mumbai that includes scrumptious chai at a road house, a skilled driver delivers my wife Esther and I to Dharana at Shillim, Princess of Retreats – or as I think of it then, still being ignorant, Maharaja of Super Posh Spas. Warm and sympathetic staff are framed by a darkness lined

with stars – an effect that only breaks when I’m informed there is a large rupee fine for smoking. I ask whether there are any snakes. Amusedly, they say there are not. We are instructed to close our eyes, think of what we have come for or hope to gain, and say it. I am thinking, “Why lie about the snakes?” and “I can’t afford those fines.” I say, “Learning.” Esther says, “Emotional balance.” Show-off.

The next morning I am scanned: 18 per cent muscle, the rest fat. The physio, Jayanta Gogoi,

‘No more booze, fags or caffeine runs my unspoken prescription

a penetrating acupuncturist and an enormously kind person, is embarrassed because I’m refusing to wear the cotton pyjamas provided and am instead in unplanned commando, having swum in my boxers after the Squeeze Glutes Gym. Despite being a largely irresponsible 52-year-old, I present no complications at first sight. No more booze, fags or caffeine, runs my unspoken prescription. Detox means massage and gym sessions.

We are waited on by drivers, butlers and fixers, as well as a life philosophy coach, a

psychologist and several doctors. But the dietician, Abhirami Mudliar, really owns our happiness. “Food is a language,” she tells us, “And I want it to speak with love.”

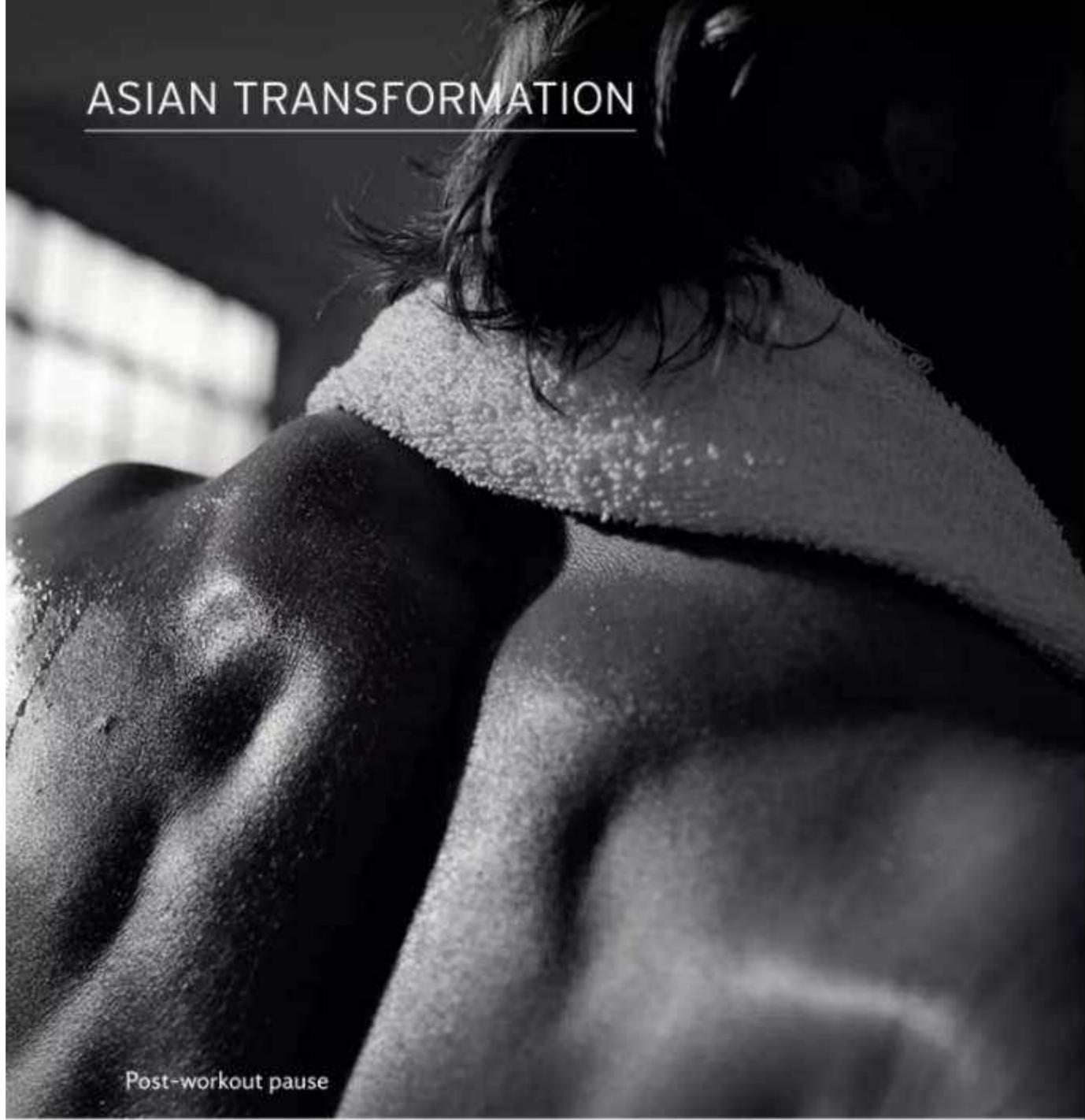
The love she most often speaks to me involves cucumber, cumin and apple, maybe with tofu or rice. Both she and Abhishek Pillay, my second trainer, grow to know me shrewdly, thanks to my habit of smoking before meeting him in the gym, and after her carefully designed breakfasts. I Hoover up

the beetroot and chocolate pleasure balls in our room, alongside gunpowder-grade camomile tea. To everyone’s credit, it is painless when

I decide to quit the fags, though I have their sulphurous support when I complain on night three that we’re hungry, have been since arrival, actual meal times excepted, and had been promised snacks.

The food we are allowed to eat is truly outstanding. The Kerala fish curry with roti, idli and chutney, and an unbelievable masala scrambled paneer, are gorgeous and could not be more healthy. The cooking class, during which we laugh and gossip with star chef Mukesh Dewasi about Gulf recipes and ➤





Post-workout pause

high cuisine in the region, is lovely. Evenings at the restaurant are beautiful, even without a vodka tonic – one night a sitar player and a drummer precede an unexpected “blessings of husbands” ceremony during which wives, dressed in saris, line up like Maharashtran queen bulbuls on the terrace, do things with powders, pastes and candles, and giggle.

Less blissful is the Ayurvedic treatment, which has me lying on my side as the masseur, having demonstrated the restraint of his strength on my arms and legs with copious oil, informs me that insertion is now a go. The old prostate exam never felt so short, thin or oily. I look up basti, the Ayurvedic oil enema, in a paper published through the US National Institute of Health, which shows some remarkable benefits. I do not know why placing vegetal oil and rock salt in there should aid rheumatoid arthritis, which I don't yet have, but there is evidence that it does, and indications of many other benefits. Measuring Sanskrit-era medicine by modern Western standards is obviously hard, if not nonsensical. But we have as many medicines as we do languages, and faith, science and arcane knowledge all have their place.

The state of my feet, raddled by possible psoriasis and fungal infection, shames me, especially in the hands of the masseuses, who wash them in salt and scrub them with limes, making me feel like Mary Magdalene. I find it almost uncomfortable to be so cared for, but many months later my feet are much better, their redness almost gone.

My top tip is watsu (a combination of water and shiatsu, invented in California, of course). Given leg floats and the instruction to “do absolutely nothing” I close my eyes as thera-

I'm held like a baby as memories and dreams drift across my consciousness

pist Pooja Gautam tows me gently around the pool of the most prestigious villa. It's quite a scene. The highest and most expensive on the property, it was designed, like all the villas and main buildings, in full eco-style by landscape architect Margie Ruddick, New York-based Steven Harris, and a team of Yale architecture students. The garden overlooks the lower pools and villas, and wide waves of forest. High up, you are soul to soul with the peaks of the Ghats even before you jump in.

Watsu creates an instant bond of trust: I'm held like a baby as dreams, cares and memories drift across my consciousness, the sunlight and shade above dappling through my eyelids. Having worked in the fields of psychiatry, trauma and treatment, I can report that watsu is one of the quickest and most effective treatments I have tried.

But it's the climb to the summit of the nearby peak that is my highlight. On that particular heavenly morning two guides and I find big leopard claw marks on a tree and almost see the Malabar whistling thrush, certainly the most mauve-green-blueey bird on earth. From the crest we gaze on the whole fair country around, its long ridges and shining waters, its height, richness and magnificence, lying over hundreds of miles. My words run out. I sketch. As we recline there, halfway up the sky, we are all in love with this world.

That the forest below has not been felled but swelled, along with its creatures, is hugely the work of Dharana's owners, the de Souza family. They saved the woods from and for the locals – who had had no choice but to slash and burn – and then recruited them to its preservation and enrichment. We take an easy stroll with Rahul Kamble, an expert ornithologist and specialist in venomous snakes. He tells me that the cobra population is kept apart from guests by the butler-drivers in their electric cars, by patrols and by the mongooses. We see these grey-red beauties trundling through the shrubbery daily, bigger than badgers and pointed at both ends.

What they should have said that first night was “Yes! We have four of the best deadly snakes and many more, not deadly. But we also have the best snake man, and the best mongooses. You are going to love it here.” Because the truth is, when we come home – me drier, fitter, hugely more relaxed (certainly in the massage department), tem-

porarily smoke-free, nutrified, mentally and spiritually more limber; and Esther, who was six months pregnant at the time, more rested, less

worried about me, and enjoying herself and her pregnancy noticeably more – we look back on it and agree that pretty well every single moment, we did. 🧘

BOOK IT

Healing Holidays (healingholidays.com/condenast) can arrange a seven-night Art of Detox programme from £2,999 per person sharing, including transfers, full board and treatments

