

Indian reservations

Following a rather worrying diagnosis, Dom Joly decided that it was time to take action – but could a fortnight at a health and wellness spa near Bangalore really help?

Being diagnosed with sleep apnoea and told that if I didn't get my act together I might not make another 10 years rather focuses the mind...

I needed to change my lifestyle and to do so I needed a kick-start. A friend suggested a place just outside Bangalore, in central southern India, called Soukya.

I knew very little about that area of India and I'm someone who is highly suspicious of what I think is technically called 'hippy bollocks'.

I've never been interested in meditation, yoga, realigning my chakras or bonding with my spirit animal. I tend to believe that exercise and moderation in everything is the key to happiness and health. Unfortunately, I'm pretty lazy and have a tendency to binge when I enjoy something, so I clearly needed some help. I needed change and maybe, just maybe Soukya was the place to do it?

So, I booked in for two weeks. Before I left the UK however, I was asked to meet the head honcho in charge of the place, Dr Issac Mathai, who happened to be in London. I went to meet him at his hotel, The Dorchester, never a good sign when you are worrying about potential medical bills...

I liked him immediately and we had tea while he looked at me intently. He told me that he could see three things wrong with me. He talked about water retention on my face and asked if I had a stiff neck as my posture was off? I awaited the third symptom with rising dread. But it never came.

He asked me what I hoped to achieve in the two weeks?

I opted for weight loss and personal happiness and he didn't seem phased by my ambitions. We parted after half an hour and he said he'd see me in Soukya the following week.



Somewhat worryingly, photos in the publicity material that he gave me, included a large photo of Fergie. Not Fergie from Black Eyed Peas but Fergie, Duchess of the Freebie, ex-wife of the Duke of Golf. This woman is a travelling Louis Vuitton of neurosis clinging onto any spiritual fad that wafts in her direction. There were also several photographs of Prince Charles and Camilla. Soukya had serious royal connections.

Eight days later I stepped off the plane in Bangalore and was whisked to the clinic in one of the fanciest Mercedes I have ever been in. The car drove up to a set of huge gates with guards outside. The gates were opened, and we

swept into the tranquillity of the 36-acre compound. I was greeted and taken to my bungalow, a comfortable enough place with a little garden but no television, no internet, no fridge, no room service. I quickly had to get used to my new regime. Three meals a day at set times, mostly taken in silence and eating only Indian vegetarian fare all grown on the property itself in the pre-lapsarian gardens. The food was sparse but delicious.

I was quickly brought up to speed with the ethos of the establishment. In a sense it was a kind of pick 'n' mix of natural therapies. There was an Ayurvedic doctor, acupuncture,

Naturatherapy, Homeopathy, yoga, mud therapy, massage, colonics...

I drew the line at colonics. I know loads of people who have had a pipe shoved up their rectum, had water flushed round their system and then sworn that they felt "incredible." I just felt that one needed to draw a line in the sand somewhere and this, for me, was it.

I threw myself head first into everything else.

I found the little room where all my treatments would take place in for the next two weeks. Two large men, who would not have looked out of place in the



Dom Joly

PICTURED: Soukya, Bangalore
BELOW LEFT: Soukya, Bangalore
BELOW RIGHT: Dom Joly's big adventure in Soukya

water-boarding department of Guantanamo Bay welcomed me and showed me into the room. They pointed at a tiny pair of paper pants on the bed and told me to knock when I was ready. They exited, and I started the usual humiliating ritual of trying to work out just how to put them on? Five minutes later, I'd done my best and knocked on the door. They entered, very kindly managed not to laugh at me in my tiny paper pants and the treatments commenced.

They were pretty much the same every day, so I shall describe a typical day in Guantanamo... sorry, Soukya for you.

First up they laid me down and poured a constant stream of warm oil onto my forehead from a bowl suspended above my head. The idea behind this was to stimulate my pituitary gland, but I have to admit to never really feeling it did that much for me.

Then two men then covered me in oil and pummelled me firmly with pouches full of herbs. This was followed by being caked in a dry powder and being violently massaged by the same two men who by now, had definitely stepped up a gear.

The morning session would normally finish with something random that I could swear they made up as a bet beforehand "I bet you he won't let us do this..."

The weirdest was mud therapy where I was caked in a thick goopy mud and left to stand in the sun while the mud hardened before having it sprayed off.

After lunch I would have acupuncture, which is supposed to not hurt, but did. I would then have various parts of my body covered in hot herb patches that were designed to do good things



to my liver, my stomach and my knees. Finally I would be offered the colonic and have to politely decline.

Once I'd showered I was taught to wash my eye sockets, rinse my nose with salt water and swish sesame oil around my mouth for four minutes. By the time all this was over I was ready for yoga.

I'd wander over to the gorgeous yoga pagoda and have an hour's session. I was and am a bit sceptical of all the spiritual aspects of yoga, but the basic premise of controlled breathing and gentle stretching was undoubtedly good for one and, after a hard day in the punishment wing, I would look forward to the relative peace of the yoga sessions.

I say relative because, the compound was right next to a railway line and so every half an hour or so, a train would roar past and the driver would honk his horn as loud as he could. I was sure he did this on purpose, just to mess with our karma.

After supper I would walk around the entire perimeter of the property on a walking path. I would do this about three or four times. There were extraordinary plants everywhere as well as the kitchen gardens where both the food and the herbs used in the treatments were grown. My favourite discovery was the imprint of a giant man, about 25-foot long with the herbs used for each part of the body growing in the relevant part so you could just look at, say, the knee and see what herbs were good for that particular joint.

Need to know:

SOUKYA, Bangalore, has deluxe double rooms available from US\$195 per person per night on a full board basis. Holistic Wellness Programmes start from US\$230 per day and Medical Programmes start from US\$75 per hour. A two-night minimum stay is required for treatments and activities, and a one-week minimum stay is required for Holistic Wellness Programmes. All prices are subject to 18% taxes. soukya.com

Once my walk was completed it would be an early bed. There was nothing else to distract me and I felt curiously calm and relaxed. In fact, I felt so zen-like that it almost frightened me. I think that I was so unused to being this relaxed that it rather freaked my poor body and mind out.

Every morning, before the treatments, I would go see a couple of doctors – one ayurvedic and one naturatherapist. Their main obsession appeared to be with my bowel movements. There was a constant line of questioning in this area. Healthy poo, I was told, does not smell and floated... now you know.

So this became my life for two weeks... well, to be truthful, 12 days. In the end it got to me and I made an early escape and flew to see a friend in Dubai on the way home and behaved in a most un-zen like manner. But those 12 days were incredible. I felt relaxed, healthy, calm and I lost a stone in weight. I'm still not convinced in many of the more spiritual aspects of these sorts of treatments, but there are some basic lessons learned.

A diet of fresh vegetables and fruit in moderate portions did me wonders and didn't leave me hungry. I learned that sometimes it's good for me to just switch off – both my electronic gadgets and my maelstrom of a mind. I even enjoyed the basic aspects of yoga. I'm not sure I'll be doing much downward dogging but a simple stretching and warm up session every morning would not be out of the question. And, best of all? No sign of Fergie whatsoever. ♦



Don Joly

TOP: Relaxation, Soukya-style

LEFT: Mud therapy in Soukya