

A Spa in the Crystalline Sahyadris

The emerald green mountain ranges are studded with crystalline limestones, fabled for their curative properties. This is why Maharashtra's first world-class destination spa is set in this pristine ambience. But there is a lot more to recommend **Atmantan** than just those mountains.

The picturesque view from the 15th floor suite window of The Oberoi Mumbai, over the turgid Arabian Sea with a barely-there horizon line, is calming. As calming as you would want it to be when you are going into therapy.

I am here for a session with the crinkly-eyed Jacqueline Bourbon, among the first of a series of healers who will take up residence at Atmantan, the enchanting destination spa within mist-covered, emerald green Sahyadris, at about six hours drive from Mumbai. The profile of British-born Bourbon reads as "a healer, a transformational teacher, a medium and a sage". She was initiated into Kriya Yoga by Roy Eugene Davis, a disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda, studied Hinduism, trained with Taoist Monks and Masters in Wudang, China, and was tutored by a third generation Master in Traditional Tibetan Sound Healing in Kathmandu.

Through private sittings, energy readings, spiritual assessments and traditional Tibetan sound healing, Bourbon, a cancer survivor, attempts to help people deal with their emotional and physical blockages. Her sessions are a blend of the old and the new: from

asking you to just speak about what brings you to her ("anyone who reaches a teacher or a healer, is there because they were meant to be"), to offering workable solutions, and healing using various methods, including asking you to lie back on a couch and relax while she works with your energy or chakras, her sessions are as much an analysis of the issues you grapple with (Stressed at work? A relationship not working out? Not sure of the road ahead? Hate urban living? Nothing is quite out of her purview) and a psychic reading of the possibilities lying ahead.

Besides healers like Bourbon, there is a lot that should make you want to take that wellness break at Atmantan. The integrated wellness resort has just won the Spafinder Global Winners of 2016 Wellness Travel Awards for 'Best for WOW factor' and 'Best for Fitness', held at the World Travel Market London Ceremony, and one can see why.

To get to the spa located deep within the biodiversity-rich Western Ghats, you drive across bucolic villages and verdant fields. I was at Atmantan during the lush monsoon months early last year.



The suites, with lake views, are perfect to spend time in after a day filled with massages and exercise



The resort is designed to allow sweeping views of the Western Ghats

The wellness resort isn't visible from the road that takes you there. You drive through lush green expanses till you reach the lobby: glass-encased, minimal, so that all you see are the hills around, rain-lashed, mist-laden, with low hanging clouds.

Again, the suites, rooms and the villas aren't really discernible amidst all those different shades of green, but maybe that's because in monsoons, the stunning landscape with intense green hills and overhanging cotton-candy clouds don't let your attention wander.

A walk across the mountain roads is a must in any season, but more so in monsoons: you encounter water streams; the landscaped gardens with their quirky installations are little oases; the walk to the restaurants through rivulets is a lovely trek. There are buggies to take you around, of course. But, I suggest, take a walk. Walk to your therapy and exercise sessions, the yoga workshops, the massages, to your breakfast, to just about everywhere through gardens with plants known for their rich oxygen emissions: Dracaena, Philodendron, Areca Palm, Ferns, Schefflera and Song of India. The sprawling 40-acres wide Atmantan campus has several trees, including mangoes, as well as a Chef's patch where vegetables are grown. But the main ingredients for your meals come from their organic farms at a little distance, but more of that later.

The view from the suites—perched so that they hang over the mountains—skims over the surface of the cerulean Mulshi Lake, right across to the dense forests through which you can trek. During the wet season, the trails are a little precarious because of the streams crisscrossing the paths, but the stupendous views of the naturally formed waterfalls are worth every bit. Winter and summer treks are equally exciting: you stumble upon all kinds of native plants and animals.

The minimalist retreat-spa has been so designed that you can't miss that superlative view of the thickly foliated Western Ghats and the icy lake from any building, villa or suite. There are 106 luxurious guest rooms and villas, with attached balconies or private sit-out gardens. The suites, then: special beds certified by Kairo practitioners to ensure that your rest is therapeutic, and a spa-like

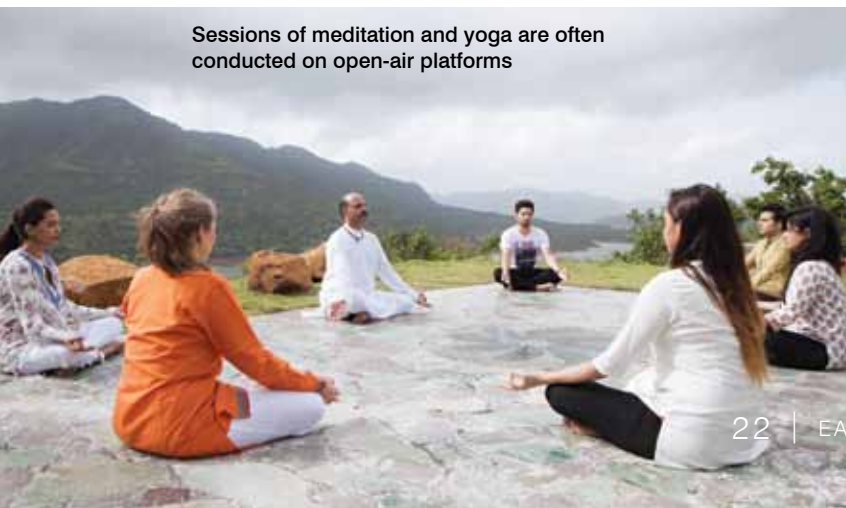
bathroom with stone steps leading to the bathtub-with-a-river-view, lovely pendant lights for mellow lighting and just the right ambience for a restful retreat. From here, the sky looked magical and the forest, impenetrable.

Atmantan recommends a minimum of three nights stay (though most packages are 5-or-7 days long), so that you maximise the sessions they offer. The pretty Athena Salim, Atmantan's General Manager, tells me over a dinner one night, "Mulshi has a strong association with wellness and healing because of the Sahyadri crystalline mountains, which are known for their healing frequency. In fact, Pranic healing recognises that in the entire world, the highest healing frequency is generated in Mulshi." A fascinating insight into why this location actually makes you want to relax those tight muscles.

Atmantan, founded by Nikhil Kapur—a tri-athlete and fitness enthusiast, and Sharmilee Agarwal—a firm believer in energy medicine and healing, approaches a spa as more than a space to relax. So their various offerings include: **ATMANTAN LIVING**, to ease you into healthy eating, regular exercise and ayurvedic treatments; the more indulgent **SPA LIFE**, for frequent travellers, businessmen and couples looking for some rest and rejuvenation; **MASTER CLEANSE**, for those seeking cellular detoxification, particularly for people who are looking to lose weight and get healthier; **WEIGHT BALANCE**, for diabetics, insulin resistant and those of us with metabolic issues so we learn how to make the right lifestyle choices; **JOURNEY THROUGH YOGA**, to delve deeper into the sacred art of yoga; **AYURVEDA PANCHAKARMA**, to unravel the beauty evident in the healing of traditional Ayurveda and detox; **HOLISTIC HEALTH**, a blend of massages that include a hammam session and yoga nidra; and for the more adventurous, **FITNESS CHALLENGE**, an intense workout programme.

I was at Atmantan Living, a wonderful three-day retreat packed with exercise, yoga, massages, a bit of Chinese healing, and lots of advice on right eating, on your posture, intermingled with classes on stretching, circuit training and TRX. This was the first time I was trying the latter two and I was worried. I didn't see myself as a person

Sessions of meditation and yoga are often conducted on open-air platforms



Atmantan offers a variety of therapies, including a few Chinese ones



The Spa uses different exercise regimes, like TRX, to help you up your fitness levels



Dining in such superlative locations is considered a part of therapy





Relax in the indoor pool that overlooks the Sahyadri ranges

in the optimum physical condition to take on intense exercising. But the highly skilled Hannes Wallin, the fitness manager who trained me, was sure I could make it, and I did. The sense of achievement stayed with me till many months later.

But I am jumping stages once again. My wellness retreat began with me answering an extensive health questionnaire even before I arrived, a session with Dr Namitha, who figured my *vata dosha* (a combination of space and air elements), and then a body composition analysis, which told me the problem points in my body and the areas I needed to work on. “Your legs are pretty strong, but your upper body is weak,” mused Wallin, looking at my report which seemed like a mesh of some sort of maps to me.

What followed were three days of utter fun: beautiful rejuvenation massages; a session on the right posture and the exercises to achieve that; an energetic stretching session; two exhausting functional training and TRX sessions done to the invigorating views of those crystalline hills; an early morning session on *netra* (eyes) and nasal cleansing, an ancient Ayurveda practice; and an eye-opening Chinese dry massage in which the masseuse worked on my stomach and its pressure points. There was a point when I cried in pain, and I was amazed when the therapist said perceptively: “You need to drink more water or in the future, lack of water may lead to kidney issues.”

It is said that your stomach is your second brain: perceptive, in need of nurturing with good, nutrient-rich food. Chef Subhendu Kadam rules the kitchen at Atmantan. They do serve meat, but as a vegetarian, I felt I had arrived in some blissful haven, because

healthy, nutritious vegetarian meals are the bedrock of ayurveda-inspired healing programmes. The beautiful lake-side restaurant is a soothing space where you eat all your meals: a wide range of fresh salads, soups, vegetables, which are sourced from their own organic farms. Often, chefs at Atmantan would dish out a customised dish to suit my mood: lightly spiced dals (lentils) and delicious chillas (savoury pancakes) with seasonal vegetables on one day, a lovely sago kheer on the other.

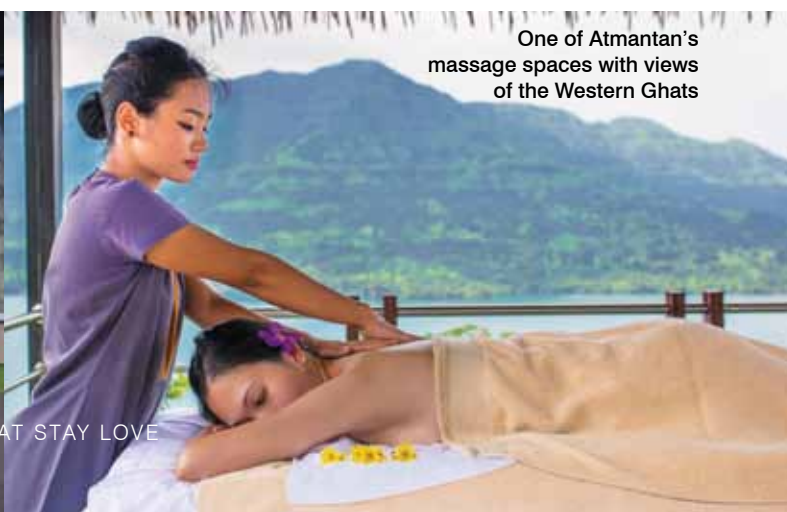
‘Curative Gastronomy’ is how they define the philosophy that guides their meals. What amazed me was the wide variety of desserts on offer: raw cacao based desserts, the pumpkin halwa made with raw sugar, Coconut Sago Pudding, and much more.

The emphasis is on gut-strengthening food, so the chef gave me several tips on what I should include in my meals: pickled vegetables for those times when I am really hungry in the middle of the night, home-made muesli made using puffed rice, and the addition of a variety of edible flowers, herbs, amaranth, bell peppers and baby radishes in my dishes.

I had my best moments after dinner: when the staff set up an aromatherapy bath for me with fragrant essential oils, or when I curled up in the aubergine-coloured high-backed chair in my room, armed with a book and some lovely tea. Or, when I sneaked out some time from all the exercise and therapies to speak to the loquacious staff that is drawn from across India, some even from the towering Himalayan ranges. Their regret: Pune doesn’t see the kind of winters their home is famous for, though, as one told me, “We love the crazy monsoons.” ■



The plush villa with an attached pool



One of Atmantan’s massage spaces with views of the Western Ghats