

# TATLER<sup>®</sup>



*Spa Guide 2023*

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# Walking into mindfulness

*Finding herself out of step with a frenzied life in London, travel editor Delilah Khomo embarks on the path towards tranquillity with a hike through the Himalayas*

Shakti guide Pujan Rai captured the image of the sun rising on a fresh morning in Sikkim



**EAST OF NEPAL, WEST OF** Bhutan; on a map of India, the Buddhist state of Sikkim looks like an upturned thumb poking into Tibet. In this tiny former kingdom, orchids and waterfalls abound; and a series of valleys, where prayer flags flutter over ancient monasteries, promise a peace and freedom from worldly cares that must make it the most healing landscape conceivable.

I'd always wanted to go to the Himalayas. They're the closest the Earth gets to the heavens, from which I dropped to land at the small, military-looking Bagdogra airport. Here, I met Pujan, my tour guide from Shakti Himalaya, who was dressed in khaki and driving a 4x4, raising my anticipation of the 'adventure' that lay ahead. And so we travelled the long – and seriously winding – roads for five hours or so, going deep into the mountains of western Sikkim. I was glad it was night-time as we went, so I couldn't see how steep our climb was.

Beyond lay a hidden world where, with no moon shining, the stars were turned up to the max and you couldn't distinguish between them and the glittering lights of the sky-bound houses sitting on a ridge between the known and the unimaginable. And when our little group arrived at our first stop, a 'homestay' in the village of Hatti Dhunga, I was hit by air which anaesthetised me with its tranquillity. Call it tiredness after nearly 24 hours in transit or the altitude of 3,365 feet; but even though I was thousands of miles from London, it was like I'd come home.

For years I have tried to find sanctuary from a hectic life and overactive mind by visiting healers and spiritual practitioners or by immersing myself in the books of, say, Joe Dispenza and Eckhart Tolle, who extol the virtues of living in the present rather than reacting to your feelings. The goal is to become an observer of your emotions in order to find a profound sense of calm: something I could grasp intellectually but never quite achieve. But recently, I realised I'd been doing

too much navel-gazing and had to look outside of myself, to something far bigger. It wasn't about needing a break. I wanted to view the world with new eyes.

Now, on this six-day Shakti Himalaya hiking adventure, I had my chance, thanks to a unique spiritual itinerary tailored for me. As we trekked from homestay to homestay (in the most luxe and low-key fashion, smoothed by plenty of cashmere, canopied beds and hot showers), there would be yoga, meditation and chanting for us to do; plus spiritual study with Champola Pemba, a Lama from the Enchey monastery who was journeying with us. The first morning began with a fresh ginger tea at 7am, after which my yoga instructor, Taranshree, led me through the postures of Surya Namaskar. There are certain places where the practice makes you feel genuinely alive; and as I balanced on a mountain lawn, one hand on my mat, the other stretched to the sun, my muscles sighed and released, giving up what felt like 10 years of tension.

Bouncing to breakfast – at which chef 'DK' served seriously fortifying platters of papaya and mango, scrambled eggs, fresh yogurt and incomparable chapati – I couldn't wait to dive into the countryside, a patchwork of paddy-fields studded with turquoise timbered cottages that were wreathed in hanging pots of daisies, orchids and gardenias. Everyone we passed smiled so widely and freely, including the stray dogs that joined us. The whole scenario couldn't help but convert you into the most serene being, emanating goodwill and positive energy.

Shakti had planned the hikes so that they alternated between the intense and not-too-strenuous but, even when your hamstrings ached, you were surrounded by so much beauty that you forgot about the pain. And that first day was particularly memorable, walking through forests of chestnut trees then down to a monastery and its little village. The atmosphere soothed, its ▷

◁ mystery stimulated and the sensation was completely other-worldly – especially as we seemed to have arrived at an auspicious time. It transpired that spiritual teacher His Eminence Tulku Sangay Yonten Gyatsho Rinpoche had just returned from three months in Britain.

I was to learn that serendipity was the norm on this trip. Young monks blew conch shells in the holy man's honour, prayer flags danced in the breeze and incense made the air hazy. (Or was it the clouds?) I met the Rinpoche the following day for tea, when he blessed me and bestowed on me some serious wisdom about happiness; and just spending time with him seemed to bathe everything in an endorphin-charged glow.

After 24 hours in Sikkim, you may feel like you've been away for weeks, but you also start to live in the here and now. At my first meditation lesson, Champola teaches me about the importance of breathwork to purify the mind, before we start to focus on a candle flame, a helpful aid for blocking out the internal chaos of 'monkey mind'. We are meant to keep going for five minutes but, after two, I find it too intense and worry that I am doing it wrong. I also have the weakest 'Om'. However, as the week progresses and my lungs grow stronger, I too can hold the chant and lose myself in a slipstream of sound.

And find myself, too. One highlight that stays with me is an encounter with Gautam Gururji, a medicine man who can truly instil belief in the power of the mind – and in his 'gift'. He's the real deal. As we ate strawberries on his farm, he told us about his extraordinary life and the thousands of people who have visited him for help with everything from coping with cancer to broken hearts. We sought out cardamom fields, wild ferns, bamboo groves and forests of rhododendrons that made me think of Manderley.

Over the week, perhaps because of the altitude, life sometimes seemed more real in my sleep-state than when I was awake. Bizarrely, I would dream of deadlines and

dinners at The River Cafe – but actually, the food here was beyond; earthy and delicious. Chicken curries appeared in terracotta pots, kept warm by tea-lights underneath. There were pyramids of ghee rice, delicious mutton stews with apricots and chicken laksa, aubergine bhajis and even banoffee pudding.

A memorable lunch was taken in an unassuming mountain cafe, barely accessible through the geraniums and orchids surrounding it, where we ate DK's fresh pea soup on a charming table-cloth of gingham laid with glasses of rhododendron wine to fight off the cold. The temperature, though, was only an occasional hazard. Even if it's overcast, you can work up a sweat in this moisture-laden air – and then suddenly the sun will pour through. Crossing a rickety bridge on one walk when the heat had got too much, I stripped off the layers and dived into a waterfall fringed by ferns and Himalayan green oaks.

Walking is a therapy in itself. As we strode along, lofty conversations about eternity and reincarnation seemed to arise naturally. I even managed to meditate for the full five minutes on the second-to-last day; and it brought complete purification to body and mind, giving me a new clarity and sense of self. Certainly, I was changed by the trip, and strengthened both mentally and physically. Not only by the hiking and yoga, the meditating and praying with monks; but by the hours passed with Pujan and Champola, gaining insights into the great existential questions to which I have always returned. The gift of being in

*Delilah Khomo sits on the terrace at Radhu Kandu*



*Hatti Dhunga village*



#### THE MARCH OF TIME

*More than 3,000 feet up in the Himalayan mountains, true serendipity awaits. Hiking through Sikkim, prayer flags fly overhead and monks await at monasteries to impart their wisdom. Shakti Himalaya tours offer the most luxurious way of experiencing the Himalayas, and founder Jamsbyd Sethna shares a place close to his heart, having walked here on childhood holidays. Where else could you find such tranquillity?*

this place – and in the present – taught me to better understand myself and the importance of pressing pause. But most of all, it helped me to see the bigger picture. □

*Black Tomato (blacktomato.com) offers a seven-night trip to India including five nights trekking through Sikkim with Shakti and two nights at The Imperial New Delhi (on arrival and departure) from £5,000, full board, including internal flights and transfers.*

*Buddhist shrines called Chortens line the walk from Hatti Dhunga to Hee village*



The old trade route, the Silk Road, passes through Sikkim



Envelop yourself in nature on a Shakti Sikkim Village Walk

## A PASSAGE TO INDIA

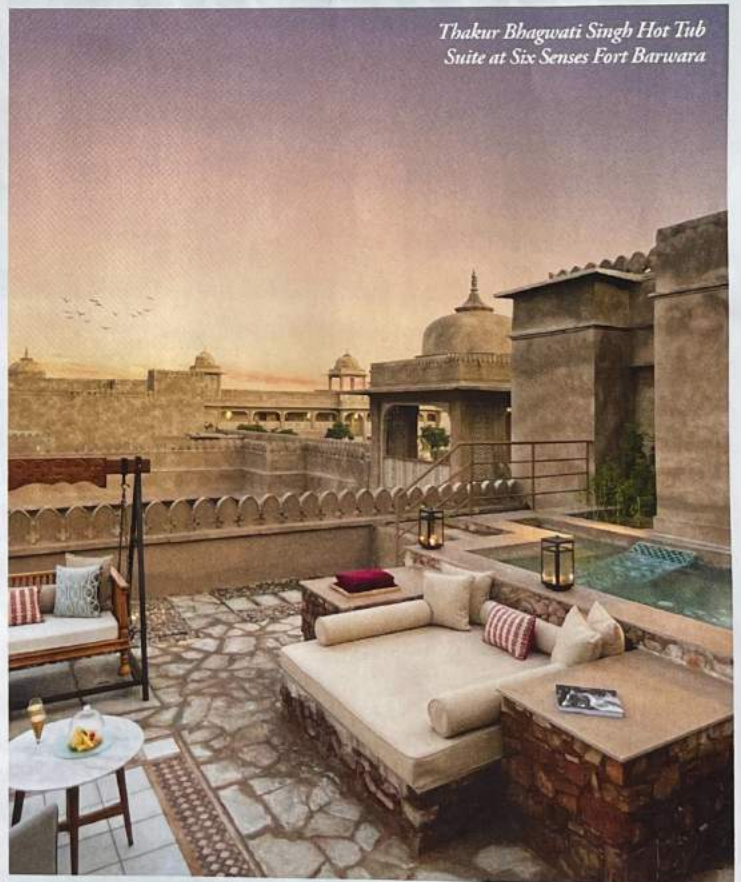
### SVATMA RAMNIVAS, TAMIL NADU

If life feels off-kilter, succumb to the emotional alchemy performed by the therapists at the new Svatma Ramnivas retreat. It's located near the Suryanar Temple – one of the main Navagraha astrological landmarks in the region – and at its heart are ancient practices, taught in the purest forms. (You can have Vedic philosophy lessons with priests.) Rightly billed as a holistic experience, the latest Siddha programme is an inspirational detox that intertwines spiritual practices and one of the best sound-healing treatments in the country. ([abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://abercrombiekent.co.uk))

### SIX SENSES FORT BARWARA, RAJASTHAN

The celestial bodies twinkling in the skies of rural Rajasthan take on a magical significance after you've spent the evening practising aerial yoga. This new addition to the Six Senses portfolio is a serious spiritual haven focused on self-transformation, offering pranayama breathwork and an array of powerful Ayurvedic treatments, alongside biohacking. Dr Neeru Jain, who heads up the spa programme, comes from the illustrious Vana retreat; and the massage ritual, performed with tiger's-eye crystals, is worth the trip alone. ([abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://abercrombiekent.co.uk))

Thakur Bhagwati Singh Hot Tub Suite at Six Senses Fort Barwara

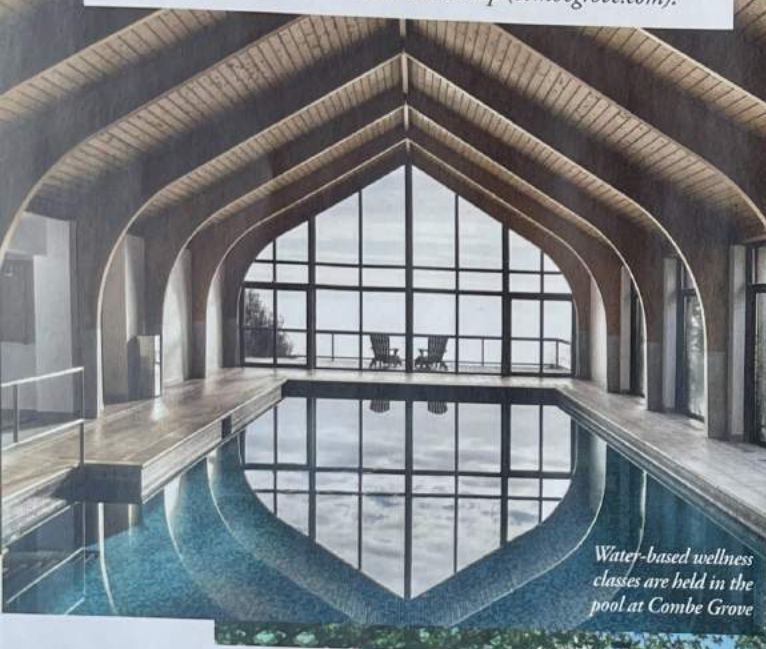


### SUJÁN SHER BAGH SPA, RAJASTHAN

On the edge of Ranthambore National Park, where wild tigers roam, SUJÁN Sher Bagh lies in wait – and its billowing-canvas spa is elegance incarnate, with far-reaching views across the wild grass. Dextrous therapists perform a knot-dispelling full-body massage with lashings of black sesame oil and warm, herb-filled poultices concocted from the spoils of the organic gardens. Scott Dunn ([scottdunn.com](http://scottdunn.com)) offers a nine-night itinerary in India, including a stay at SUJÁN Sher Bagh, from £6,349, full board, including game drives, flights and transfers.

### COMBE GROVE *Bath, UK*

Behold a new superstar in the making. Combe Grove has a clear-cut aim: to improve metabolic health – a key to enhanced and extended wellbeing – within the cradle of its 18th-century manor house and 70 acres of forestry and meadows. A year-long programme of check-ins and consultations kicks off with a week's retreat comprising talks, treatments and time-restricted eating. Everything is grounded in nature: morning rambles reset circadian rhythms; the food comes from the estate's field-to-fork kitchen garden; and the decor takes its palette from grass and bark. Bats, badgers – and, yes, moths – are lovingly conserved; rescue-goats trim the brambles; and walks in the woods become spiritual epiphanies. For even deeper immersion, future plans include treehouses and threshers' huts. *Seven-day retreat, £2,600, including a year's programme and Health Club membership (combegrove.com).*



*Water-based wellness classes are held in the pool at Combe Grove*

### JAMAICA INN *Ocho Rios, Jamaica*

In tune with its 65-year history of easy glamour, Jamaica Inn's farm-to-skin foraging ritual introduces guests to the therapeutic qualities of its ocean-front garden bounties: exfoliating pineapple, detoxifying lemongrass, healing papaya and so on. (You'll also learn the recipe for a divine piña colada body-scrub.) But the setting, under a rainforest canopy between beaches, with a saltwater bath carved into the cliff, is what gives The Ocean Spa a head start in delivering relaxation. In the outdoor treatment pavilions, you get a concentrated sensory dose of all that is special about this resort. Serenity, as intoxicating as the Planter's Punch served on the beach, is in the exceptional therapists' lulling tempo. Don't miss the Ocean Ritual, which starts with a vigorous scrub, followed by a thermal cocooning in oatmeal, honey and coconut milk. Buffed and hydrated, you're primed for the Blissful Stone Massage, high up in a tree-hut, with surely one of the best views from a treatment table in the world. *Turquoise Holidays (turquoiseholidays.co.uk) offers seven nights from £2,475, including breakfast, flights and transfers.*



*Indoor and outdoor pools reflect the landscape at LeFay Resort & Spa Dolomiti*

### LEFAY RESORT & SPA DOLOMITI *Verona, Italy*

For a change from the revered Lake Garda LeFay, try its younger Alpine sister, where glamour is elevated to dizzying heights – you can't move on the terrace for chic Europeans sporting this season's Moncler. The spa, more than 53,000 square feet of earthy, elemental energy, is also a crowd-puller. Less doctor-led than its older sibling, its focus is on the natural world, and treatments fold in Alpine butter, horse chestnut and mountain flowers. There are five 'sensory circuits', inspired by the seasons, whose areas differ in temperature as well as treatments and types of phytotherapy (healing with active plant ingredients). The former range from ice fountains and salt inhalations to bio-saunas and potassium-enriched pools. Meanwhile, the Michelin-featured Grual restaurant is a destination in its own right. After, say, saddle of roe deer and cherries, and iced green-apple meringue, sleep comes easily. Especially if you've booked the penthouse, with its bubbling hot tub, private sauna and head-spinning views. *Elegant Resorts (elegantresorts.co.uk) offers seven nights from £1,755, including flights and transfers.*



*Be at one with nature at Jamaica Inn and enjoy breakfast on your cottage deck*