

FEELING LIKE A
GODDESS
AT TAJ BEKAL

Some time ago, the Taj rebranded its wellness offering because of a need to go beyond the usual massages that most guests associate with spas. While there's nothing wrong with massages, J Wellness Circle offers a whole new subliminal experience as Shoba Narayan discovers much to her delight.

Havan being performed at the Taj Bekal





To have milk and *panchamrita* (a mixture of five special substances used in worship) poured over your body is profoundly moving because it is how we Indians worship our Gods. We welcome them into our homes with garlands and song, pamper them with food and drink, and do *abhisheka* (ritual bath) and *archana* (singing songs of praise) for them. This was what I was experiencing at the J Wellness Circle at the Taj Bekal.

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Aptly named Abhisheka, it is a signature treatment that is available only in two Taj properties for now: the Taj Ganges in Rishikesh and the Taj Bekal in Kerala. If you are in either of those locations, do yourself a favour: Sign up for an Abhisheka ritual. Here's why.

It begins with a bath, but not just a normal bath or even one in a bathtub strewn with rose petals. In this treatment, you sit at the edge of a nice-sized plunge pool. In sequence,

sea-water spiked with minerals, milk, and *panchamrita* are poured over your body. In that moment, as I sat bare-skinned in the candle-lit, rose-petaled bath, I felt like a goddess.

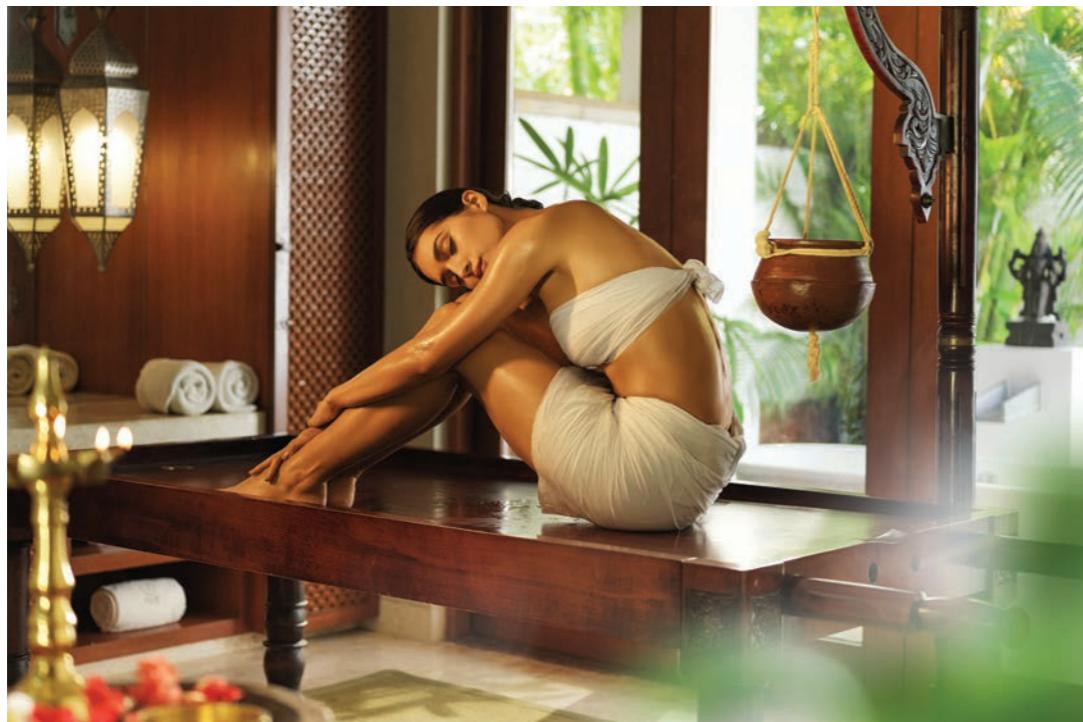
No, really – I am not just saying that. Because you see, this is how I worship at home. I pour milk and water over my Shiva-ling and then anoint him with sandal paste and flowers. Now, all this “*poojan*” was being done to me by Pooja, my

therapist from Nagaland. In that moment, as I received the treatment with hands folded into a namaste, I felt profoundly grateful.

Some time ago, the Taj rebranded its wellness offering because they wanted to go beyond the usual massages that most of us associate with spas. Nothing wrong with massages, but J Wellness is a whole new experience. Every brand says that they draw from local traditions, but J Wellness does this authentically

and unapologetically. All their treatments have Indian names like Vishrama and Nidra. They dig deep into local traditions – incorporating vastu and ayurveda concepts into the design of the space. Treatments

rituals – that all of us in India find so meaningful. If you ask what makes India different, I would say that it is our comfort with rituals. Treatments at J Wellness begin with the chanting of the Dhanvantri mantra.



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pay homage to the specific location of the property – the Bekal spa, for instance, is designed like a typical Kerala “Vaidya’s” home. But the part I loved best was the fact that the treatments don’t shy away from

Dhanvatri is the celestial physician in Hinduism. Considered an avatar of Vishnu, he holds a conch, Sudarshana chakra, a kalash or pot of amrita (the nectar of immortality) and, interestingly

enough, a leech or a *jalauka*, in his four hands (thus confirming the ancient practice of bloodletting through leeches). By the time I left, I wanted to learn the mantra by heart and chant it for self-healing.

full of happy families when I visited. Most spoke Hindi and Gujarati; some spoke Tamil and Kannada. To keep them happy, a host of activities are available: ziplining, archery, village biking, kayaking (in season), nature



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But first the beginning: To get to Taj Bekal, you fly to Mangalore and drive two hours down the coast. The resort's design is inspired by traditional Kerala *ketuvallams* or houseboats. With 75 keys, it is medium-sized,

hikes, trips to the nearby Bekal Fort or temples. Most guests don't step out once they enter. A swimming-pool, the beach, and an in-house creche keep young guests busy, giving their parents some downtime to relish the spa.

Treatments at J Wellness begin with the chanting of the Dhanvantri mantra

Rebranding the spa has brought in those guests who are serious about wellness, according to the wellness manager. Many guests come for as long as a month. The minute they arrive, an in-house WhatsApp group is formed. It includes spa therapists, doctors, chefs and service staff to ensure seamless communication about the patient. For instance, the doctor tells the chefs what to prepare for each meal – mostly

The treatment protocol is decided by an ayurvedic physician after an extensive initial consultation. Once he learned about my diet and routine, he gave me certain simple tips that I could incorporate in my life: like drinking one litre of water first thing in the morning. When I complained of sleeplessness, he prescribed the *shirodara* – a deeply relaxing treatment in which warm

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sattvic food, served in the room so that guests don't get tempted by the buffet spread on offer. A large part of the wellness manager's job involves motivating and keeping guests on track for their wellness journey. This is not easy. 'They come with knee pain for treatment and on Day 2, they want to join the village cycling tour,' he says. 'I have to tell them: No. They need to rest their knees.'

oil is poured on your forehead for a good 30 minutes. After the *shirodara*, I enjoyed an *abhyanga* or oil massage, expertly done by Rojina and Premeshwari, both from Manipur. Most of the therapists have been trained in-house at the Jiva Academy in Bangalore. After three months of training, the therapists are sent to different Taj properties all over India.



Relaxing
by the pool

Learning the difference between 'spa yoga' and 'wellness yoga'

On day 2, my itinerary included a yoga class. I really didn't want to go. I have done yoga since childhood. It is part of my routine, something that I take for granted. With the hubris of a long-time practitioner, I thought: What will I gain from this? I have taken yoga classes in every resort that I have visited over the years. It is mostly a waste of time – at least, for me. How wrong I was. My instructor is a young man trained in the Bihar School of yoga. He first took stock of my 'level' by asking questions. Yes, I could do a *shirasasana* (head-stand). Yes, I routinely did *sarvangasana* (shoulder-stand). I had trouble with forward-bends, the *paschimottanasana*. Then, we began with the *surya*



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namaskar and then onwards. 'Do the movements artistically, with beauty,' my instructor urged. When I lifted my head up into the *bhujangasana* (snake-pose), he said, 'Imagine that you have the ease of a snake.'

This internalisation of yoga was what I had forgotten and what most Western teachers don't get. It is perhaps the difference between 'spa yoga' and 'wellness yoga'. After all, yoga is as much about using your

find and imagine your 'spirit animal'. Well, in yoga, we imagine many animals in the poses we maintain. When we imagine and internalise them as I did in my one-hour session at Taj Bekal we reap the full benefit of this ancient powerful practice. Later, my instructor taught me *yoganidra* which really helped my sleep. It actually begins with the *shavasana* or corpse-pose. Here's a tip: when you have trouble sleeping, try this. Lie stiff yet relaxed in *shavasana* – the corpse pose and see where it takes you.

Food is intrinsic to wellness. At Bekal, the chefs and service staff try to marry health with taste. I had a delicious *kanji* (porridge) for

Yoga is as much about your mind as your body. The greatest benefit comes when you imagine yourself to be a sturdy mountain in the 'mountain pose', and a tree in *vrikshasana*.

mind as your body. The greatest benefit comes when you imagine yourself to be a sturdy mountain in the 'mountain pose', and a tree in *vrikshasana*. Today, shamanism is all the rage globally and you are taught to

breakfast one morning with sprouts, matta rice and delectable *manga chamanthi* or mango chutney. For lunch, I enjoyed a terrific Kerala *sadhyam* on a banana leaf. On the day I left, the executive chef walked

Rituals are an integral part of the spa experience at Bekal

up to me as I helped myself to a variety of dishes from the buffet. Can we make you some bajra rotis, he asked. Surprised, yet pleased, I said: Yes. Later, I asked him, why he offered bajra rotis – of all things – to me. After all, I was South Indian. I enjoyed the idlis and dosas on offer. Bajra was far from my mind...and palate. Well, said the chef, 'You are on a wellness trip and you seem to enjoy millets. So I thought of it. I worked at the Umaid Bhavan in Rajasthan and have tasted exquisite bajra roti fresh off the field. So I know its delicacy.'

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Reading the guest's mind and anticipating the guest's need is the art of hospitality. Simply going around asking 'Is everything all right, Ma'am?' is lazy. As someone who loves hotels and the hospitality business, I discussed this with the operations manager, who manages to appear



An inside view of one of the spa rooms

Kerala hotels have the luxury of indoor-outdoor rooms. Mine had a small plunge pool, a lovely divan-swing where I could work in the early morning while listening to the barbets, koels, sunbirds and woodpeckers that the hotel's naturalist had shown me during an evening walk. At night, I

Kerala hotels have the luxury of indoor-outdoor rooms. At night, I indulged in the outdoor shower before crawling into the fresh comfortable sheets.

welcome and celebrate the elephant-headed God; these community festivals where Gods are brought into our homes and hearts is the wellspring of Indian culture. No wonder we think of the world as one family and our guests as God: *Athithi Devo Bhava* ('the guest is like God').

This view, fundamental to India, is the foundation of Taj hospitality and it was how I was treated during my visit to Taj Bekal.

Perhaps this is what they call Tajness. ☺