



# the lion, the crocodile and Michael Jackson

Fiona Agombar spends time at the Sivananda ashram in South India

I had mixed feelings about going on a Yoga holiday at the Sivananda centre, Neyyar Dam in Kerala. On the one hand, everyone said the location was spectacular. Then there was the Yoga and ashram lifestyle itself to look forward to. On the other, I wondered if the whole Sivananda thing was a bit cultish - especially as celibacy (Brahmacharya) was always pushed quite strongly. However, I had just spent 45 days locked in a clinic doing *panchakarma* - an ayurvedic detox treatment, so I thought a 2 week Yoga vacation at an ashram in South India sounded like a good idea.

Of course it is always a mistake (never mind about being non-yogic) to pre-judge things. The Swami who runs the ashram is from Zimbabwe. I hope he won't mind that I am bringing this up, but he is the one immortalised as 'Swoony Swami' in Lucy Edge's book, 'Yoga School Dropout'. I have to say, Ms Edge does have a point. Swamiji, a doctor in a former life, is an absolute sweetie and exactly how I think a swami should be: kind, self-effacing, modest and very genuinely spiritual. I emphasise his qualities because during my time in India I met plenty of swamis who were vain and egocentric - and who wouldn't know spirituality if it came up and bit them on a chakra!

I had been warned that the ashram could be very manic during the

busy teacher-training periods. However, thankfully I arrived during the much quieter monsoon season, which turned out to be the best time to go. Everyone was right about the setting. The ashram is located in the middle of a wild life park, on the edge of a huge lake surrounded by mountains in the distance. The scenery is just fantastic.

My first impressions then were good. The ashram was clean - quite a bonus in India (I had been used to a cockroach infested room in the last place I stayed in), and everyone was really welcoming and helpful. My room, which I shared with an Australian actress called Amy, (more on that later), was spartan but adequate. We had a very hard single bed each, swathed in very necessary mosquito netting, but just a cold tap and bucket in place of a shower. We did have our own terrace though, so I would advise paying a bit extra for a shared room rather than a dormitory. When I say 'a bit extra' - well everything is relative. I was paying £50 . . . a week!

After we settled in we were given a tour of the site and things just got better. The two Yoga halls, open on three sides to the elements, were wonderfully inspiring places in which to practise Yoga and there was a beautiful temple on the campus dedicated to Lakshmi, Goddess of Wealth. There was also an Ayurvedic clinic, which did





Fiona (centre back row) with fellow course members

great massages from around £6 - I had one and it was bliss. The word 'vacation' however, is a bit of a misnomer unless you count getting up at 5.20am everyday and a more-or-less full programme with compulsory attendance as a holiday.

The morning started with meditation at 6am, followed by satsang. I have to say that I loved satsang, but not everyone was so enthusiastic. For example, Swamiji asked if anyone had a problem with all the chanting. Miriam from Germany said that well, yes, actually she did. But by the end of the two weeks, following his advice just to accept it and go with it, she was as enthusiastic as anyone else and seemed to enjoy chanting 'Jai Ganesha' and so-on at the top of her voice. Instruments such as drums and tambourines were placed in the hall which everyone enjoyed shaking and banging to add to the atmosphere, so it was all quite lively.

At 7.30am we had our first break for tea, followed at 8am by a two-hour Hatha Yoga session. There was a choice of two classes: beginners or intermediate. Then at 10am the first food of the day was served - brunch, eaten with fingers sitting cross-legged on the floor. We were all starving at this point. I thought the food was fantastic - not everyone would agree with me - but the food was *sattvic* and usually consisted of rice, salad, and great vegetables. This was followed at 11 am by a lecture with Swamiji, which I always enjoyed. Here he elaborated on such topics as the Sivananda way of proper exercise, proper breathing, meditation, diet and positive thinking. Oh, and celibacy, which was debated very hotly - with me personally arguing against it! (So I'm never going to be a great yogi or reach enlightenment then). After the lecture we had a period for Karma Yoga - we were all allocated different jobs to do for an hour to help the ashram. Finally at 1.30 we had a much needed two-hour break during which optional coaching was offered. Some of us used this time to swim in the lake. Amy, my room-mate insisted on washing her

clothes in the lake as she had read somewhere that this would help the water shortage. I found this hilarious, especially as it was pouring with rain much of the time, but she loved the novelty. Then came another 2 hour Hatha Yoga session, followed by the second and last meal of the day at 6pm. Then another break, followed by meditation and another satsang at 8pm. We were all in bed by 9.30. Twice a week we left the ashram for a walking meditation through the wild life park, which ended at the wall of Neyyar Dam. Here we would sit meditating or chanting whilst watching the sun-rise in the mornings, or the fireflies dancing across the water at night, with the mountains in the distance. It was pure magic and something I will never forget.

At first I loved the intermediate Hatha Yoga sessions. However, after a few days I began to get tired of always doing the same twelve postures (Swami Vishnu-Devananda, a disciple of Swami Sivananda who set up a series of ashrams following his death, developed an asana programme which consists of six rounds of Surya Namaskar, followed by 12 postures done in strict sequence). I was also beginning to find the teaching somewhat uninspiring - it was a bit like doing an exercise class with someone reading from a script. The intermediate classes tended to be taken by students who had recently completed the teacher-training course. However, after the first week, Amy hurt her neck and decided to try the beginner's class instead.

Training to be a Yoga teacher herself, Amy was so impressed with the teaching, she persuaded me to try. This was a completely different experience. Sadashiva, who taught in the morning, and Durga, who taught in the afternoon, were both top-rate and I learnt loads from both of them. I consequently started to attend the coaching sessions so that I could improve on postures I had always

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