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A taste of India

Ancient philosophies are at the heart of Shreyas Retreat near Bangalore. After trying the lodge's new cookery course, Olivia Greenway feels the benefits

OLIVIA GREENWAY | WEDNESDAY 04 APRIL 2012

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The weekly market at Nelamangala, 30km north-east of Bangalore, is bustling. The main road is choked with slow-moving traffic, each vehicle repeatedly beeping its horn and throwing up clouds of yellow dust. Next to a low wall, fortune-tellers sit with their packs of cards and green parrots. To one side, a rough patchwork of coloured plastic awnings keeps off the worst of the Indian sun. Underneath, stallholders sit cross-legged on the bare earth behind the small mountains of their wares.

Squeezing myself between the noisy crowds of buyers, I see row after row of produce: tidy pyramids of brown elephant-foot yams, fat round pumpkins, fragrant guava, blush-pink pomegranate and bright green papaya.

From the bustle I head back to my base: Shreyas, a small lodge an hour's drive from Bangalore airport. At 3,000ft above sea level, and almost in the middle of southern India, Bangalore does not suffer the searing heat of lower-lying parts of the country. Shreyas is a dazzling retreat, best known for its yoga. However, I am here to sample the lodge's brand new "Culinary Experiences" package. Over

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the course of a week, I've been promised 10 cookery classes, each lasting 90 minutes, where I'll learn to make 40 dishes – and be immersed in Ayurvedic food philosophy.

Ayurvedic principles suggest that ailments derive from eating the wrong stuff, particularly processed foods, and drinking alcohol and carbonated drinks. Many foods, including meat, refined flour and white sugar, should be shunned, and we should eat more vegetables, fruit, herbs and spices. The visit to Nelamangala market introduced the fresh, local produce that forms the basis of this cuisine.

My home for the week is one of eight tented luxury cottages set in a former coconut plantation now enhanced with flower-filled gardens and curving paths. There's an open-air yoga hall; a spa with open treatment rooms; a library, and a dining area, with large windows overlooking a grassy spot where evening meals are eaten al fresco. At the heart of the resort is an infinity pool.

In the immaculate teaching kitchen, classes are small. The focus is on simple, home-cooked food. My teacher is Rame, who also accompanied me to the market. He started here as executive chef when Shreyas first opened and is responsible for its reputation for gourmet vegetarian food. We will be cooking dishes from the south, including idli (fluffy rice cakes served at breakfast), sambar (the spicy sauce) and masala dosa (crisp, savoury pancakes, usually stuffed with potato). Spices play an important role. "Stick to seven of the most popular ones, and keep them for only six months," Rame tells me. "Don't have lots of spices you hardly ever use."

Our morning classes are hands-on, while the afternoons are spent observing the experts. We use little oil, no eggs and just occasionally some yoghurt or paneer (unsalted white cheese).

The cooking is uncomplicated and we don't use any fancy equipment. Quite often we use our hands. I'm shown how to make lentil rissoles by using the inside of one palm to persuade the mixture into a teardrop shape.

In each session we make four items and taste them afterwards. On the first day, we learn about knife-sharpening and chopping, an important lesson to master, since all the food is made from scratch. Vinod, the assistant chef, reduces a bunch of coriander to a finely chopped pile in nano-seconds.

Rajan, the executive chef, is my teacher on the other days. With his help, I whip up a spicy tomato shorba soup, a spinach and paneer masala, stuffed potato paratha and scrambled tofu with peppers. We dry-roast sesame seeds to go into spinach soup, roast corn over a flame to transform it into burnt corn salad, grate carrots to make sweet halva and soak basmati rice to prepare biryani.

On some mornings, I find myself in the open-air yoga studio at 6.30am, cross-legged on my mat waiting for the sun to rise. Occasionally, I try breathing lessons, meditation and chanting.

I also visit the organic gardens where I help to ease up onions, the rich, red earth clinging to my hands; and pick chikoo, which tastes like toffee apple, from a tree. I'm shown aloe vera plants that we use to make a refreshing drink and the shady greenhouse where the houseplants and flowers are grown.

At the end of the week, I'm hooked on the Ayurvedic approach to cooking. Instead of feeling deprived, I am energised. And rather than forget everything once I'm home, I've already prepared two dishes – and my knife skills are improving, too.

Travel essentials

Getting there

The writer flew from Heathrow to Bangalore with British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com). Returns start at £666.

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Shreyas Retreat (00 91 80 2773 7102; shreyasretreat.com) offers the seven-night Culinary Experiences package from \$2,095pp (£1,397), including transfers, full board, yoga meditation and cookery sessions.

More information

British passport-holders require visas (in.vfsglobal.co.uk).

India Tourist Board: 020-7437 3677; incredibleindia.org.

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