



Industrious: Fishing is the main industry of the region, which is now a burgeoning tourist destination for the health conscious. Pictures: Nick Melidonis



Entertaining: Dancers at Somatheeram perform for the guests.

It's all about empowering the spirit and returning home with more than photos. **Monica Videnieks** reports.

I was sold on the benefits of ayurvedic health and medicine the moment the head-standing, back-bending yoga teacher at my retreat told me his age, 79.

Everyone at Somatheeram, the ayurvedic Health Retreat at Kerala on the south-west coast of India,

looks good, youthful, happy and healthy.

I guess it's hard not to.

The Kerala region is home to ayurvedic medicine, the world's most ancient alternative medicine (at an estimated 5500 years old, it is older than traditional Chinese medicine). And while the Indians

have long considered that good health is all about balancing the body and the mind, westerners are only now catching on.

The retreat runs a specialist wellness package where guests experience an authentic ayurvedic getaway. This is a holiday to get healthy, on the inside and out.

Nestled between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, the south-western province of Kerala is 580km long and ranges in width from just 35km to 120km.

It's hard not to be smitten by Kerala. The people are gentle and charming, with a culture that seamlessly mixes Christianity, Hindu and Islam. The main industry is fishing and at dawn each morning the crews return to the wide, sandy beach in their wooden boats (which they row) to count and sell their morning catch.

When it comes to Kerala, throw your perceptions of India out the window. This part of the sub-continent is tropical, quiet and not over-populated.

But ayurvedic medicine — fuelled by the insatiable interest of western tourists — has propelled the beautiful region into a



All smiles: The Kerala people are gentle and charming.



Rustic: The accommodation is basic but clean.

burgeoning tourist destination for the health conscious.

As you arrive at the large hand-carved wooden gates at the retreat you will leave the outside world behind and concentrate on you.

Each guest has daily consultations with two ayurvedic doctors who assess not just physical, but emotional health. Analysing your body, lifestyle and

mental wellbeing, they categorise guests into particular “doshas” (or types) and tailor an individual treatment program including diet, body treatments, exercise (predominantly yoga and walking) and herbal medicine for each guest.

In ayurvedic medicine, meaning “the study of prolonging life” doctors believe nourishing the body through massage is just as

important as healing it with medicine. On most days, each guest is treated to about two hours of massage, exfoliation and facial treatments, all designed to accelerate the elimination of toxins and restore balance to the body.

Softly spoken young women wearing bright blue saris with sweet-smelling jasmine flowers braided into their hair comprise the team of 80 therapists at the

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Attentive: Staff at Somatheeram are on hand at all times.

resort. Each guest has two therapists assigned to you throughout your stay. They are instructed by the doctors as to the treatments you require.

Rejuvenation and energy were what the doctor ordered for me during my stay. Before each treatment my therapist, Molly, and her assistant, Suni, whispered a prayer for my health before working, in unison, to massage by

tired and run-down body back to health.

“Sleepy, you move over now,” Molly would whisper in my ear when I inevitably drifted off to sleep.

Each day I enjoyed Pizhichil, Sirodhara and Kizhi treatments which included rhythmically massaging warm herbal oils on to

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Tasty: Kerala is famous for its food.



Serene: Kerala is 580km long and is bordered by the Arabian Sea.

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my body and face, patting herbal leaves on to my skin and hair and pouring medicated butter milk and oils on to my forehead to release tension. By the time I left the retreat my skin was silky smooth and glowing, just like the Kerala locals.

I was told celebrities from around the globe slip to the retreat for an annual detox and rejuvenation but you wouldn't know it. Every guest at the retreat spends much of their day wearing the signature maroon gown with their fragrant, oil-soaked hair tied up in a wrap of specially prescribed herbs according to what the doctors say your body

needs. Days are spent lazing on your private hammock beneath the palm trees and overlooking the Arabian Sea, lounging by the pool or strolling along the coastline. It's impossible not to read a book or three.

Several times a day the disarmingly limber 79-year-old yoga teacher Moranda Eldin teaches his craft to people of all levels and occupations.

"You'll never accomplish the bend back without putting all the weight on your feet," he instructed our apprehensive class, before most of us achieved the unthinkable.

There are also daily meditation sessions and the team of 16 ayurvedic doctors — who take nine years to qualify — are on

hand 24 hours a day. Programs are designed for rejuvenation, relaxation, weight loss and detoxification.

The aim is to restore not just good health but contentment. ayurvedic medicines are created in Kerala, sold at the on-site pharmacy and can be brought into Australia.

It should be noted that vices are not encouraged. Alcohol and cigarettes are on offer but not recommended. Ayurvedic coffee is also available but once you taste the freshly squeezed juices, especially pomegranate and warmed herbal waters, you won't miss your flat white (I didn't, and I'm a coffee addict).

The accommodation is rustic, but clean and entirely appropriate

for the ayurvedic experience. You'll sleep under a mosquito net and wake to the roar of the waves from the Arabian Sea and the birdlife, excited by the returning fishing crews.

Guests are encouraged to stay a minimum of 14 days in order to detox, relax and finally invigorate their body and spirit before returning to their hectic lives. But this is no uncomfortable detox. Kerala is famous for its food and freshly prepared meals can be ordered 24 hours a day. The restaurant offers an extensive buffet suitable for the vatha, pitha and kapha doshas, so you won't go hungry.

I boarded the flight back to Perth feeling relaxed like I haven't in years and vowing to incorporate

some of the lessons I'd learnt about myself in Kerala into my daily life.

And I'll be thinking about Moranda Eldin when I pull off the bend back in my regular Perth yoga class. I can only hope to be that nimble when I'm 79.

● Something to consider: There are close to 100 ayurvedic retreats in the Kerala area, all with similar and in many cases, exactly, the same name. To ensure you're travelling to an authentic retreat, speak to an agent who specialises in retreat travel.

Monica Videniels was a guest of Singapore Airlines and SilkAir and was guided in Kerala by Julie Baker from Journeys of the Spirit.

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