



A CLEAN BREAK

Travelers visit the Art of Living Retreat Center, high in the Blue Ridge Mountains, to embark on an intensive detox regimen rooted in ancient Indian healing traditions. It's all about getting rid of the bad juju—and as **MICHAEL JOSEPH GROSS** finds out, it's also about what you take home with you.



▲ Clockwise from top left: Khichdi, a dish of rice and moong dal that is a staple of the ayurvedic diet; on the grounds of the Art of Living Retreat Center; a view from an Art of Living guest room; an offering to give thanks to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the Bangalorean guru whose teachings guide the retreat.

▶ *A turmeric smoke treatment, intended to alleviate congestion and inflammation. Far right: The main meditation hall at the Art of Living Retreat in North Carolina.*



A-LIST ADVICE

How do you unplug when you travel?

TERESA SULLIVAN, EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA SPECIALIST AT MANGO SAFARIS:

"I try and keep my phone on airplane mode as long as possible and not post on social media or check e-mail. I find time to read and talk to locals in the area. I stay more in the moment when I'm just 'being' instead of spending my time sharing with others digitally." mangoafrican.com

EVERY SUNDAY, Medha Garud tells me, a woman and her husband eat brunch in their kitchen, looking out their window, watching their neighbor do laundry. And each week the woman says the same thing to her husband. *What is wrong with our neighbor? She does not know how to wash her clothes properly. She puts them in soapy water, but still they come out dirty—you can see the grime from here!* Then one Sunday, the woman sees something amazing: her neighbor's clothes are clean at last. *Maybe someone taught her how to use good detergent!* the woman says. *No, honey,* the husband answers. *I woke up early and cleaned the windows.*

Smiling at her own joke, Medha pauses to let the parable sink in. We're sitting in her office in the Art of Living Retreat Center in Boone, North Carolina, where she is describing a regimen derived from ayurveda, the Indian healing tradition, called a *panchakarma* cleanse. "In Sanskrit, *pancha* means 'five,' and *karma*

means 'actions'—actions to purify the sensory organs," she explains. "If our sensory organs are not clean, our perceptions are not clear. And making decisions based on unclear perceptions makes people unhappy. When we think we perceive a problem in the outside world, the problem often lies in our own distorted perceptions."

Medha, from Bombay by way of Chicago, oversees my five-day cleanse, which begins with our consultation. The experience, like her story, is effective, unequivocal, and a little corny. In contrast to quick-fix "detoxifying" treatments, such as store-bought, at-home juice cleanses, this guided retreat is humbling hard work: an adventure, not a vacation.

The retreat, which opened in 2011 in an abandoned transcendental meditation center, is linked to the global Art of Living Foundation, established in 1981 by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, a nonsectarian guru from Bangalore. It stands in a temperate rain forest atop the Blue Ridge mountain range, where pine trees meet cumulus clouds. I'm welcomed by a fragrant vegetarian lunch of *khichdi*, the staple of the ayurvedic diet. This is Indian comfort food: a pale chartreuse near-mush of white rice, mung beans, vegetables, ginger, and about a

half-dozen more spices. A spoonful of ghee helps the *khichdi* go down. *Khichdi* would be my primary nourishment during the cleanse and for about a week afterward.

Most staffers at Art of Living are students of Sri Sri (as everyone calls him), whose gentle face, captured in a range of blissed-out expressions, appears around the property on desks, altars, bulletin boards, and vehicle dashboards. ("The picture reminds me that he's always watching over me," one devotee explains, "and watching over my car.") But Medha doesn't push the woo-woo. Briskly cheerful, she takes my pulse and assesses imbalances in my systems using a score of unfamiliar terms, the most basic of which is prana—which means breath, or life energy. The cleanse is meant to raise my prana. Fresh, hot *khichdi* is packed with prana. Food that is processed, frozen, or cooked in the microwave loses some or all of its prana.

Medha also prescribes spa treatments meant to wash my windows. These include a series of oil massages called *abhyanga*, "to move your toxins toward your gut," and a ritual of breathing turmeric smoke "to clean your brain." The climactic event is *virechena*, an all-day purgative process that starts early in the morning when Medha gives me a cup full of an herbal laxative that tastes like grass, mud, and licorice. She prays over me as I drink it, then sends me to my room with clear instructions. I am to release, as fully as I can, all control over my thoughts ("Whatever comes, let it come. This is when your mind releases its toxins, too.") while dedicating every moment, aside from time spent on the toilet, to doing just one thing: sitting and looking out the window.

Looking at the phone, computer, or TV is forbidden. So are reading, writing, praying, and meditating. I am not even supposed to stand up and walk except to go to the bathroom. When Medha first told me the plan,

I thought I might go crazy from boredom. It turns out to be one of the best days I can recall.

Outside the window there are three trees: two pines and a maple. I come to know them better than any other trees I've ever seen. The trees are there all day, while insecurity, anxiety, fear, anger, resentment, mourning, and regret take turns on me, hard; loves, dreams, plans, and memories—of tastes, of faces—take turns on me, too. None of these thoughts *are* me; I am only their observer. Branches catch the light from many angles, east to west, morning to evening. I am there for all of it.

Each hour, a knock comes at my door. Medha: "Have you gone yet? That's great! Again? Yes! How many times?" In the middle of the afternoon, when my gut is empty, she sends me food to eat while I continue watching out the window. Then she says I can sit up on the bed and keep looking out the window until 5:30 p.m., when finally I am allowed to sleep.

The next day, Medha is pleased. She takes my pulse, finds my systems back in balance, and describes the ayurvedic techniques that will help me stay that way. I should eat this but not that, put these drops in my nose each morning and those drops in my ears once a week, massage myself with oil before showering, and rub myself with salt before toweeling dry. "This is how you can make your own buttermilk," she says. Next thing I know, she's sitting up a little straighter, tucking her elbows a little closer to her sides, and announcing, with faintly widened eyes, "We come to the best part, which is—enemas!" I travel home and do what I can to follow her instructions, but most of it falls by the wayside. I still cook *khichdi* almost every week, though, and I often remember the trees. ●

Five-day Refresh ayurvedic cleanses start at \$1,745; artoflivingretreatcenter.org.

Traditional Indian Healing, at the Source

The Art of Living Foundation has centers throughout India, but head to these four top spas for a truly luxurious approach to ayurvedic therapy.

ANANDA IN THE HIMALAYAS, RISHIKESH

At this former maharajah's palace in the Himalayan foothills, Tibetan-style massages and cleanses round out the holistic treatments. anandaspa.com; doubles from \$1,100.

WILDFLOWER HALL, SHIMLA IN THE HIMALAYAS—AN OBEROI RESORT

This stately manor is known for its Rejuvenate program, consisting of a massage using warm poultices, followed by a head massage and *shirodhara*, a therapy in which oils are gently poured on the forehead to open the third eye. oberoihotels.com; doubles from \$510.

LEELA PALACE, UDAIPUR

This fairy-tale-like, Bill Benschly-designed resort on Lake Pichola has an extraordinary spa where you can begin your treatment with a foot-cleansing ritual and full-body exfoliation, then enjoy a hot-stone massage with warm oils and a mud wrap. theleela.com; doubles from \$217.

KALARI KOVILAKOM, KERALA

Housed in a 200-year-old palace, this treatment center offers an intensive wellness boot camp that includes therapeutic sweating, full-body scrubs, and plenty of ghee drinking. cghearthayurveda.com; from \$7,022 per person for a two-week course.

