

## TRAVELLERS' TALES

# WELLNESS IN Kerala

Ayurveda originated in the coconut state of Kerala, but can it really transmit 'the knowledge for longer life', as it promises? **Heidi Fuller-Love** finds out

THE TART SMELL of root ginger mingles with sweeter cinnamon and tannin tea odours as the herbal rice pouch comes down — thwack, thwack, thwack — on the back of my neck. The pouch is heavy, solid as a small kosh; the rice stings my skin and the rhythm is relentless. I'm at Kalari Kovilakom, India's top ayurveda centre, run by eco-hotel group CGH Earth, being healed of the stress-related aches and pains caused by my rat-race life.

One of the world's oldest healing sciences, ayurveda — from the Sanskrit *ayus*, meaning life and *veda*, meaning knowledge — has been around for over 5,000 years in India, but has only recently started to become popular in the west.

Based on the notion that illness can be treated, or prevented, by balancing the body, mind and consciousness via three energy centres called *doshas*, ayurvedic treatment involves a complex, and at times fairly unpleasant, combination of treatments, ranging from herbal massages to *gheeb* (liquid butter) detox drinks.

## Royal retreat

On the way to Kalari Kovilakam, I had an inkling of what was in store when Shijo, my lovely driver, stopped to buy me a bag of delicious, stuffed *dahi vada* pastries, telling me: "Eat up lots. In there, meat, leather, alcohol and not even much food is allowed."

Surrounded by emerald rice paddies and framed by the tiger- and elephant-packed

Annamalai Hills, Kalari Kovilakam sits on the dusty outskirts of Kollengode, a bustling hill town whose Vishnu temple attracts pilgrims from all over India.

One of Kerala's strictest Ayurvedic treatment centres, the minimum stay is two weeks and trips beyond the centre's austere iron gates during treatment are forbidden.

Built for Princess Dhatri, daughter of a local king, as a refuge from court life, Kalari Kovilakam is housed in a beautifully restored 19th-century palace whose high-timbered dark wood ceilings and wood-panelled walls — lined with photos of the plump princess and her arty friends — immediately impress.

I'm greeted by a solemn house servant who whisks my leather shoes away and hands me a white cotton tunic to put on. 'Leave your world behind,' demands a notice on the wall.

Along a dimly lit, colonnaded corridor, perfumed with incense and wood polish, I'm led to my spacious villa, one of 18 with romantic four-poster beds and colonial-style slatted blinds. All are surrounded by manicured gardens, planted with ayurvedic herbs and mango trees smothered in pepper vines.

Next morning, after a half an hour of questioning and a physical examination, I have my first treatment. Dressed in a scanty paper thong, I lay on a massage bed, listening to the birds chatter outside, while my pretty therapist says a singsong prayer then gives me a blissfully relaxing warm ▶

