

Travel/India



Golden dreams rise to the surface on a nourishing beach retreat

Jackie Butler finds peace and inspiration on the Walk Your Talk Retreat, run by a Cornish former teacher in a coastal paradise in northern Kerala

The water is a warm, salty bath, wrapping around my body like a silk cocoon. Behind me the Arabian Sea stretches to a far horizon and the sinking sun slips gently down to meet it, casting a reflection like liquid gold on the inky surface. It's one of the most exquisite sunsets I have ever witnessed, yet I turn my back on it to survey the scene back on shore, a few short strides away.

Here, on this idyllic, secret stretch of India's Malabar coastline, red and white kites are circling above the coconut palms against an evening sky of clear azure blue.

The pale sandy beach ambles for miles, but is entirely deserted; three primary-coloured fishing boats lie tucked into the shadows, ready for their early morning outing; nearby a fisherman's checked shirt flutters in the gentle breeze on a makeshift washing line strung between two tree trunks.

Each wave lifts me momentarily out of my depth. As my body rises with the tide I catch a glimpse of Ali Singh beginning his nightly ritual, lighting the candles and filling up the water jugs for the dining table beneath the romantic glow of an emerging moon.

Directly behind him is the door to the seafloor room I have called home for the past seven days... seven days during which I have been wholly nurtured; encouraged to let go of all disabling tensions and worries and, instead, focus on the essence that lies beneath.

I've been coaxed to take care of



Chera Rocks, near Tellicherry (top) was the perfect place for Jackie (above) to relax and renew in comfort; exquisite sunsets were a bonus MAIN PICTURE: JACKIE BUTLER

myself, acknowledge the things that bring me joy, and discover a universal spirituality, my own powers of healing and the key to unlocking my dreams. Three times a day I have eaten with my hands delicious and nutritious home-cooked food, I have revelled in congenial company, basked in picturesque surroundings and soaked up the intriguing and enticing local culture.

I can't remember the last time I felt so calm, healthy, relaxed and clear-minded. Even the certain knowledge



that I must leave this haven when morning comes cannot spoil this sheer bliss, out here in the waves, floating beneath the dusk light.

This magical moment can find its perspective if I backtrack to the beginning of my journey. I left a frost-bitten, snowbound England a few days earlier to travel, with hope, into the unknown, armed with a plane ticket to Kerala – the state that stretches down India's most southerly-westerly coastline – and a booking for the week-long Walk Your Talk Retreat created by Cornish lass Vanessa Tucker and her partner Mano Guillemot.

I'd never been on a retreat before.

The idea had secretly appealed for years, but I'd never come close to justifying or affording something that could be considered so self-indulgent while my, now adult, children were growing up. Besides, there was that niggling doubt that going to India to "find yourself" was something for self-absorbed crackpots, a la Edina Monsoon in *Absolutely Fabulous*.

But, as a single, independent, middle-aged – and over-tired – woman, the opportunity to ditch that unfounded and outmoded prejudice and open my mind suddenly landed in my lap with a modest windfall (thank you PPI insurance claim!) and a personal recommendation from a friend.

What I felt I needed was to recharge my batteries and redefine my place and purpose, buoyed by the promise of guidance and support, and the bonus of warmth and beautiful surroundings.

The last part I was absolutely certain about, having first fallen in love with the lush scenery and the welcoming people of Kerala on a trip to the Backwaters around Cochin and Alleppey, and the hills of Munnar a couple of years ago.

I'd also checked out the retreat venue online and found only glowing reports from visitors and photographs that could have been captured on **PAGE 16**

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It's playtime on the beach at Chera Rocks, with Vanessa Tucker (also pictured below), Jackie Butler and a fellow course participant; right, the table set for dinner under the coconut palms; below, the Ganesha statue, a local fisherman

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tioned "paradise". And so it came to pass, two medium-haul flights later from London's Heathrow, via Qatar, I was met by a smiling taxi driver waving a big white sign bearing my name in black marker. I emerged into a pleasantly hot and humid early morning at Calicut for the trip north.

En route I feasted my eyes on the green and pleasant landscapes – this isn't dubbed God's Own Country (like Cornwall) without reason. And I quickly re-acclimatised to the scary Indian driving. Here beeping your horn loudly is a courtesy and swinging into the oncoming traffic to pass a family of four perched on a motorcycle, overtaking a tuk-tuk, is considered careful.

If you haven't been to India before, you get used to it, I promise, and Kerala is a gentle introduction to the country as a whole – a bit like being a tourist in England and coming to the Westcountry rather than Birmingham.

Almost three hours, and a little doze later, I climbed out of the back seat beside a tall and broad mango tree next to a couple of rural homesteads, where a trio of cows looked up and flapped their ears momentarily, then carried on chewing the cud. Two smiling women in colourful saris were squatting on the ground, dealing out little circles of freshly-rolled poppadum like decks of cards onto a long tablecloth to dry in the sun.

This is as close as any kind of motorised vehicle can get to the Shangri-La that is Chera Rocks; if it's dark you need a torch to negotiate the earthen pathway which meanders through scrubland; gaps between the trees reveal a tantalising glimpse of the magical seaside vista below.

Laid-back, Brittany-born Mano was there to greet me, along with ever-cheerful multi-tasking resort superman Ali, who sprinted ahead carrying my suitcase on his head as if it weighed no more than a coconut.

Mano led me down, down, down flights of rough-hewn rocky steps, until my feet touched the fine, soft sand and this dream hideaway was revealed in all its glorious simplicity. Nestled behind a gentle headland point and with sands reaching out towards Kannur in the north and Tellicherry to the south, Chera Rocks is a relaxing and healing place in itself, remote, peaceful and with a gentle sea breeze to take the edge off the heat – average temperatures here are around 28 to 30C all year. Owned and run by the affable Nivedh Sp, who



Vanessa is bright and bubbly, but calm and gracious too. She developed the course by distilling the elements which fuelled her own transformation

is usually around to welcome, chat and advise, it's more homestay than hotel, with just eight or nine brick-built Western-style en suite letting rooms.

It's a place where you could just swing in a hammock, swim, eat and lie on the beach all day, but add Vanessa's thoughtful programme to the mix and a sojourn there becomes a uniquely rewarding one.

If you were a car, the Walk Your Talk Retreat would be a service and MOT with a view to all-round better performance. Vanessa provides the tools and you become your own mechanic. It's an organised programme, but it isn't school, it isn't a boot camp, it isn't an ashram, it isn't about deprivation, and it isn't about making change for the sake of it. It's about stopping to listen to yourself, tuning up the bits that are worn down or misfiring, and finding clarity to get on with life, feeling lighter and more focused.

It's something that's very personal for each participant – it depends on what your current situation is, your state of mind, and how much you are willing to face and embrace; sometimes uncomfortable truths can surface, but the aim is to let those go to clear the way forward.

Our group was, predominantly, as I had anticipated, female, friendly and over 40; but there were a couple of men too – one who came as half of a

couple and the other who was with his mother.

Vanessa is bright and bubbly, but calm and gracious too. She has developed the course by harnessing and distilling the elements which have fuelled her own transformation from over-stressed, divorced Devon secondary school drama teacher into inspirational therapist and guide.

Brought up in Coads Green, she attended Launceston College, then spent several years in hairdressing before retraining as a teacher. She now combines the best of the ancient Indian disciplines of yoga, meditation and ayurveda, the healing and energy of reiki, with more modern Western therapy models, like NLP and hypnotherapy, all of which she has been studying seriously for several years, visiting India annually. Vanessa and Mano now spend around half the year over there and the other half back home in Plymouth. In the UK she runs workshops, keeps developing her skills and takes individual consultations, while Mano runs a busy summer creperie at Salcombe.

But, let's get back to Kerala... Here Vanessa fine-tunes her programme and approach according to the dynamic of the group she has – usually around a dozen. I've practised yoga sporadically in the past; two hours of it before breakfast each morning sounded something of an endurance. I never imagined they would fly by so swiftly and enjoyably.

Gently and kindly tutored by Deepthi and Robbie – a pair of super-supple teachers who trained with an eminent yoga professor at the nearby Kannur University – I felt I understood it for the first time as a holistic practice rather than an evening class exercise regime. I absolutely loved every minute of those early mornings learning to really breathe deeply and attempting asanas, or postures, in our airy sea-view classroom, shaded by coconut fronds.

We breakfasted daily on the freshest of local fruits – tiny sweet bananas, mango, papaya, pomegranate – smoothies, breads and eggs, tea and coffee, before resuming for Vanessa's retreat sessions.

Watched over by a magnificent gilded statue of Ganesha – elephant-headed Hindu deity and universal positive symbol for the removal of obstacles – we progressed over the week through a structured, but adaptable process of acceptance, trust, courage, enlightenment and manifestation, via elements of meditation, reiki, relaxation, focused discussion and some joyful artistic expression and playtime out on the beach. Mano



also taught us how to tap into the energy that swirls around us through his own favourite discipline, the ancient Chinese practice of qi gong.

Lunches were tasty and generally mild vegetable and egg curries, home-made breads and various rice dishes, and the occasional treat like the uniquely sweet and spongy kalathappam – a special cake made with rice flour, coconut, banana, cardamom and decorated with cashews. One day the brilliant cook proudly presented us with the traditional Kerala lunch consisting of various vegetarian dishes and chutneys served, in a strict rotational position, on a banana leaf.

By afternoon, we had been active in a relaxed kind of way, for the average British eight-hour working day. It would have been easy to stay put and chill out, or take advantage of one-to-one sessions with Vanessa. One guest wanted hypnotherapy, another opted for crystal healing. But I couldn't resist doing a little snooping in the surrounding area.

For this, it's best to have some help and a driver; at Chera Rocks they can call up enthusiastic tour guide Biju Aravind who operates under the banner of Explore Tellicherry – the name of the nearby town which was once occupied by the British and a key port for the spice. Biju knows every place and spectacle that's worth seeing, but we only had time to briefly scratch the surface. Teaming up with

Pauline and Sue, a pair of sisters about my age, we asked Biju to take us to a spice market to buy locally grown peppercorns, cardamom, nutmeg and cinnamon – Kerala is the spice capital of the world, after all. And we wanted to ride in one of those classic, white 1950s-style Ambassador cars, which were introduced to 30-year-old Gajandran, who had been brought by his keeper to take part in a colourful celebration festival at one of the local Hindu temples. He was tucking in to a giant meal of coconut leaves before being dressed up in red and gold for the ceremony.

We took a longer drive on another afternoon to the new Sargalaya crafts village, where artisans showcase skills like weaving, handloom fabrics, coconut crafts, wood carving, painting, jewellery-making and sculpture, and sell their work direct – a perfect source for gifts like fans, rugs and traditional cream and gold Kerala saris to bring home. It's a hotspot for traditional performers too, like renowned classical dancer and choreographer Lissy Muralidharan, who was in residence the day we called by.

The sisters and I also grabbed a tuk-tuk to the nearest ayurvedic hospital

for some therapeutic massage. This is not a spa treatment by any stretch of the imagination. But if you abandon all such expectation at the door and embrace the experience then it can be both soothing and invigorating. The massage table is solid wood, there's a lot of oil to slide around in, and my choice of the Abhyanga treatment involved a thorough head massage, two women pummeling the muscles of your whole body in long, firm sweeping strokes, a steam bath in one of those old-fashioned metal cabinets you see in films, followed by a trip back to childhood being scrubbed with a soapy sponge and a bucket of hot water. I felt as light as air afterwards... and very clean.

Back at Chera Rocks, dinner took place by candle and moonlight under the palms. This was when the cook really excelled herself, conjuring up nightly feasts. Her menus were based around the catches of the day – the crabs, prawns, mussels and many varieties of fish caught by the fishermen who take their boats out each dawn. To accompany there were different dhal and vegetable dishes, with puris and parathas or rice.

There was ultra-safe UV filtered drinking water on the table, and available at all times, but if you wanted some alcohol, Ali keeps a fridge stocked with Indian bottled beer and reasonable but pricey local wines.

After a leisurely and sociable evening meal, I was lucky if I could keep my eyes open long enough to read



Vanessa's course notes or write my own reflections of the day. But one night a few of us joined Biju on a late bus trip to witness the famous Theyyam, a traditional socio-religious ritual ceremony of dance, fire and thundering drums, with male performers porfiraying deities, heavily made up and dressed in elaborate, colourful costumes.

Bearing similarities to Padstow's Obby Oss, it is unique to this northern part of Kerala. Each town and village hosts at least one in the local temple during the six-month Theyyam season and it is truly a sight to behold. On the night we went, whole families – from tiny babes in arms through to the very elderly – gathered for the fascinating and baffling spectacle which carried on into the early hours. I fell asleep on the bus home.

If the whole experience sounds a bit too perfect then I can offer a couple of elements that took a little getting used to – and I'm mostly talking creepy crawlies. Morning and evening, the mosquitoes will bite tasty Westerners, so spraying was a must, but Kerala is outside the malaria zone, so thankfully no tablets are needed. I did share my en suite bathroom with a cockroach – my pet hate. Nipping to the loo in the night became a bit of a stand-off if she took her customary position between me and the toilet, but we developed a system for skirting around each other.

There was an ant incident one night too; I didn't notice the thin line marching across the bathroom doorway and accidentally despatch a few by standing on them. Next morning I witnessed the sobering sight of the colony joining forces to carry their dead back under the floor.

The sporadic wi-fi connection began as an irritation but was revealed as a blessed opportunity to disconnect from the modern world. And the regular morning and evening one-hour power cuts? Well, who needs electricity when you've got warmth, the moon, the stars, the ocean – and a candle?

I loved the whole experience so much that I'm already planning to do it all over again.

Fact file – plus your chance to win a free retreat place

The next Walk Your Talk Retreats run at Chera Rocks Beach House, Kerala from November 16 to 23, January 18 to 25, 2014, and February 15 to 22, 2014. Standard prices for each week start from £950, to include the course, accommodation and three meals a day. Flights are not included and start



From top, Mano Guillemot leads the Walk Your Talk group in an energy-harnessing qi gong session; Jackie meets elephant Gajandran in the town of Msho where he was taking part in a temple ceremony; the classic Ambassador car arrives at the mango tree to take us to the spice market at Tellicherry; Theyyam drummers whip the crowd into a frenzy at a late night ceremony near Tellicherry in northern Kerala; applying the intensely colourful and complex Theyyam make-up is a rare skill

PICTURES: VANESSA TUCKER, JACKIE BUTLER, ALI ARVIND

