

WISH UPON A SPA!



Picture: GETTY

Island paradise: Lynsey de Paul enjoyed Ayurvedic and international treatments

SHOULD you be reading this article on a dull February Saturday after a long, tiring week of work and are contemplating the daunting prospect of shopping and domestic tasks, then it is more than likely you know in your heart there is a healthier, better way to live.

Sadly, if you're like me, time, responsibilities, money and other pressures probably stop you leading it most, if not all, of the time.

But I was run-down and needed to do something about it. I started doing some research and explored all kinds of exotic possibilities until I discovered an Ayurvedic spa on the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean.

As the rain beat down outside my North London window, I logged on to the spa's website and gazed dreamily at photos of blue skies, white sands and clear waters.

The resort was called Shanti Ananda — *Shanti* means 'peace' and *Ananda*, 'bliss' — and I was sold. I needed peace, bliss and somewhere that could refresh my mind, body and spirit.

We touched down after nearly 12 hours in the air and I disembarked to feel a blast of warmth and sunshine.

I was whisked away down winding roads through field after field of sugar cane. Sugar was, at one time, the island's lifeblood, but competition from South America with cheaper produce changed that.

The main trade is now tourism, and Mauritius caters to it well.

We eventually arrived at the resort, which is spread over 38 acres and awash with hibiscus

Singer LYNSEY de PAUL strips off, tunes out and finds Nirvana on a heavenly spa break to Mauritius

by LYNSEY de PAUL

derived from the Sanskrit. Many believe it is a spiritual recognition of the soul within the other person.

I was handed a set of beads, an iced drink of fresh ginger, lemon and honey and shown to my picturesque villa, which faced the sea. At night, under an infinite canopy of silvery stars, I was to find, to my amusement, that this walk to my villa triggered a chorus from the baritone bullfrogs in the pond nearby.

At 5,000 years old, Ayurveda is the world's oldest recorded healing system. It works on the principle of achieving health through balance and harmony of the humours, or doshas.

Western medicine excels in treating traumatic injury or acute and emergency care, but we are riddled with autoimmune diseases such as arthritis, allergies, cancer and even addiction.

I made an appointment with the Ayurvedic doctor, Dr Mane, a slim, charming man who would assess my needs and determine

whether I was a *Vata*, *Pitta* or *Kapha* dosha body type.

He took my blood pressure, felt my pulse and weighed me. He asked me personal questions about my sleep patterns (awful), lifestyle (unhealthy) and whether I like sleeping in a hot or cold room (oven hot).

FROM this he determined that I had a dominant personality, coupled with an emotional, sensitive side that I keep hidden. This made me *Vata/Pitta*. *Kapha* would indicate a calmer nature.

As I do not eat meat, he prescribed a vegetarian diet to improve my immune system, and suggested several other treatments.

My first treatment was *Abhyanga*, during which I was laid out on a carved teak massage table in a peaceful room, lulled by soothing Indian music. The air was scented with the fragrance of flowers floating in large wooden bowls.

But the main event was the four-handed synchronised whole body massage, performed by two therapists. This helps your body to detox, normalises blood pressure and relaxes you. But

there are no discreetly placed towels. Instead, you are practically in the buff and smothered in lashings of essential oil.

This is followed by a hot steam bath. A slight Indian woman, who looked like I could blow her over, but who had thumbs of steel, came in to the steam room with a bowl of thick brown liquid.

'What's that?' I asked.

'Is cr*p,' she said.

'Is cr*p?' I replied somewhat astonished.

'No — is scrub!' she, thankfully, enunciated.

Afterwards, I felt my muscles had surrendered a good deal of the tightness and stress from my fast-forward city life and my tired, dry English skin radiated a healthy glow, warmed and smoothed.

The next day, I met with a delightful visiting young Indian yoga teacher called Bhavini. She had been educated at Cornell University in the U.S. and had led a high-octane life as a corporate attorney.

But she had yearned for the sun and a life based on yogic principles, and so gave up her practice to follow a different path. For 90 minutes a day, Bhavini showed me how to breathe, stretch and enter a place of peace.

She made it look easy but yoga employs rarely-used muscles and holding certain positions for a minute was a challenge. To my annoyance, I discovered I certainly couldn't maintain my balance standing on one foot with the other poised half-way up my thigh. Instead, I kept falling over like a drunk.

But the body is able to learn and strengthen surprisingly

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A date with the dolphins

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quickly, and after a few days, without thinking, I was standing like a flamingo with ease.

Over 12 days, I enjoyed a mix of Ayurvedic and international treatments — it was aromatherapy one day and Swedish massage the next. The Pizichil treatment for hips and thighs starts with a gentle exfoliating rub of mineral salts, while the Udwarthana involves being slathered in essential oils and tapped with heated linen pouches filled with herbs.

Apart from the treatments, a few sight-seeing trips had been planned by White Sand Tours. The first was to the capital, St Louis, with its variety of arcades and stalls selling Western and indigenous goods. There were sarongs, kaftans, white cotton shirts and woven baskets.

The large, covered spice market oozed the pungent scent of cardamom, all-spice, ginger and every other exotic seasoning available. All the dried herbs and spices sitting in small, neatly-labelled bottles in my kitchen back home suddenly came to life.

Next, I visited the Royal Botanical Gardens of Pamplémousses, where our guide pointed out some of its 500 trees, from the palms to the *Ficus religiosa*, the sacred fig tree of India. It is noted for its great size and longevity and was the tree beneath which Buddha sat when he attained Enlightenment.

The ponds were peppered with

long-stemmed white lotus flowers projecting bright yellow stamens and water lilies that live and die in a single day.

Another day was spent sailing on a catamaran, while schools of bottle-nose dolphins swam alongside and leapt out of the water, as curious about us as we were about them.

I visited the second tallest statue in the world, of the Hindu God Shiva which measures 108 metres, the tumbling Alexandra waterfalls and the dormant volcano. It was paradise.

But the highlight was that I was able to get back in touch with ways to lead a more healthy and balanced life back in the big city. I returned to the UK four pounds thinner, tanned, stretched and healthy and I had experienced 12 days of Heaven. Now, time to hit the shops.

Ultimate Retreats (0800 559 3961, ultimateretreats.co.uk) has seven nights at the Shanti Ananda Maurice from £1,999 per person. Price includes B&B

accommodation, return scheduled flights with British Airways, airport taxes, fees and charges, transfers, insurance and cancellation cover. Prices based on departures between April 7 and October 8.

Please note, Ultimate Retreats are exclusively available to people aged 21 and over.



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