Deep Breathing
TURNING THE FOCUS INWARD ON A SPIRITUALLY INCLINED WEEKEND GETAWAY
BY NILOFER VENKATRAMAN

Although I knew a lot of people who have stayed at an ashram, I'd never been to one myself, mainly because I'm not a fan of organized religion. But when a friend convinced me that almost anyone can gain from a visit to a place like the Isha Yoga Center, I decided to visit it for myself. After all, a lot of travelers today are seeking spiritual experiences—place of quiet and rest that rejuvenates mind and body. And yoga and meditation retreats are at the top of this list.

After a short flight from Mumbai to Coimbatore, I took a 1½-hour car ride from the airport to the foothills of the Vellanganth Hills, where the center is located. The centre’s indoor and outdoor spaces were attractive and well-designed. In particular the profusion of greenery and gorgeous flowering plants were soothing. I had imagined a more basic and austere environment. I wasn’t expecting to see carved rocks, aesthetic woodwork, and inspired design in the architecture.

On check-in I was handed a schedule of the week’s programme of activities which I could attend. Tasting food, eating with Rishikesh, and seeking deeper meaning to life, they believe, is through rigorous yoga, meditation, and regulating one’s food habits. This wasn’t going to be a walk in the park.

The Isha Center aims to be inclusive and universal and it was clear to me that it offers something deep and meaningful to the over 4,000 volunteers who live there. It has thousands of visitors coming in every day from a variety of cultural, religious, and economic backgrounds. Many seek spirituality and a healthier lifestyle come for short courses or just for a few days to acquire a yoga or meditation practice that can become part of daily life.

However, because the experience that the yoga center offers is derived from yogic culture, Shiva is considered the Adiyogi or the first yogi. From the huge Namaste wall at the entrance, to the leela at the Dhyanalinga Yoga Shrine and the rituals at the Linga Bhairavi shrine, the symbols, associations, and various features of the ashram derive from what I understand at Hindustan. That said, during my three days there I didn’t hear a word about ‘god’ even though Shiva was not spoken of as god, nor was there any talk of heaven or hell, superhuman controls, or victory over evil. Instead, what I did hear was a lot about how I could enhance the quality of my life, the perceptions of everything around me, and increase my consciousness of the present. The guru Any organization like this has a spiritual head. The guru of the Isha Center is Sadhguru, the founder, spiritual guide, and the voice and face of the organization. I attended an impromptu darshan with him on the lawns of the centre and he also cracks jokes, does not hesitate to criticize deviates, and tries to give simple, matter-of-fact answers to problems. At the gathering, I also encountered followers swaying, sobbing, and extending their submission in various ways. I chose to ignore that which I found incredible or puzzling. The fact is you don’t have to be his follower or devotee to gain from the yoga or meditation practices being taught.

WHAT TO DO

There are a variety of ways one can experience what the Isha Center has to offer. Here are some of them:

1. RETREAT PROGRAMMES: Most people start their association with the centre with a four-day Inner Engineering retreat. I didn’t do it, but explored aspects that make up such a programme. Inner Engineering teaches among other things pranayama and Shri Shri Ravi Shankar’s Maha Munir, which is a breathing and meditation practice to improve health and achieve internal balance. There are a variety of other programmes. For instance, I met someone who had attended the five-day Yaneetra Eye programme which tackles eye problems.

2. SPIRITUAL HOLIDAY: 3+ DAYS

At the Isha Yoga Center, 3+ Days

Regular: 390 INR

Isha Yoga Center

The Dhyanalinga is a place for deep, peaceful meditation. Shiva is regarded as the supreme deity and it is located in the heart of the park. The leela is a daily event where the leela is performed in a circle of four. The leela is a group of ritual dances that are performed in a circle, accompanied by the drum. These rituals symbolize the journey of the soul towards the divine, and are performed to invoke the presence of the divine. The leela is a powerful experience for those who participate in it, and it is open to all, regardless of their beliefs or background.