Daily routines involved eye exercises, eye packs, specific Ayurvedic massages, and yoga to benefit the eyes (Inner Engineering/Sadhana Eye participants generally get some free).SELF EXPLORE Thass like those who are unsure of what exactly they want to experience at this centre can book a room and then examine the possibilities available. For many, the day starts with a dip in the teerthabhumi, the aquamarine sacred water pool. One afternoon I changed into a robe and walked down a steep flight of stairs 90 feet underground to the large subterranean pool called the Chandrakund. The water was freezing and I only managed to stay in it longer than a few minutes because I was distracted by the lovely painted mural on the wall. At 6 a.m. one morning I saw yoga heading to the teerthabhumi, but I didn’t want a second dip given how cold I had found it the first time. Instead I went directly for my yoga session where I learned the Surya Kriya, and then made my way for a meditation session and later, kundalini chanting. In the evening I attended a Yoga Nidra session, which was restful and calming. With no pressure to attend any particular session, I attended what I wanted to. It was comforting for me, a first-time, to know that if I liked something I could continue to do it and learn more, if I didn’t, I was at liberty to walk away from it at any time.

SURYA NAMASKAR Every yoga session I’ve ever attended has had a different version of the Surya Namaskar and the Kriya Center is no different. Their unique Surya Kriya is a 24-step routine that promises to make you very fit if you practice it 3 times a day. I learned it while I was in Isla, but unfortunately only followed it for about a month. A brief illness interrupted my practice and then I wasn’t disciplined about restarting. It’s definitely something I would like to get back to.

TREMBLES The centre’s two temples or spiritual spaces, the Dhyamayana Yogic Shrine and the Linga Bhairavi shrine, are Devi temples that are not more different from each other. Dhyamayana Yogic Shrine is a spherical pillar-less brick dome, which is empty save for a large black linga at the centre. The entrance is a column on which I saw the symbols of various religions of the world. It symbolizes both that this is a space of no religious affiliation, and one that people welcome from all of them. Groups are led into the main temple, empty space where no one speaks. You don’t go there to pray or perform any ritual. That’s perhaps what appealed most to me. On one occasion a lone sitarist played a soulful tune lifting the energy in that windowless space and allowing me to be very, very still. With eyes closed in meditation it allowed me to unwind; the stillness, and giving up of excess of everyday life was one of the highlights of my stay at the centre. The more sacred temple is the Linga Bhairavi Shrine. It was bustling with visitors when I visited. It spent a few minutes and exited. For me in Isla, it was a religious space akin to other Hindo temples and I preferred the Dhyamayana. But others find it deeply meditative and serene. The devi at this temple is also said to wishful wishes of devotees.

WELLNESS When I visited, a delightful cairn of red, brown, living over the entrance to the Isla Rejuvenation Center where Ayurvedic massages, therapies, and assorted treatments for pain and specific ailments are available. There are several 5, 6, or 7-day rejuvenation programs that visitors can enroll in. For deep analysis and treatment of specific health issues there are a variety of medicines dispensed in the form of Siddha and Ayurvedic treatments. I had a general consultation with Max, a qualified allopathic medical practitioner turned Siddha medicine advocate. She prescribed a series of changes in my diet to include at least 50 percent raw vegetable/fruit, as well as a course of rasayans and cheudharas (herbal-mineral formulations) aimed at purifying and restoring internal balance. She suggested consuming a small ball each of neem and turmeric on an empty stomach with lassi-laced water, as an energetic and cleaner every morning. Finally, she also recommended an abhyanga massage which I received that evening. It was a rather vigorous massage with two practitioners giving me a rhythmic rub-down with a large quantity of herbal oil. This massage is traditionally believed to be very useful in loosening up toxins in the body so they can be expelled.

There are two teerthabhumi or cleansing pools at the entrance, the Chandrakund for women and the Suryakund for men.

STAY & EAT

Guests have several options for accommodation within the ashram. The 70 rooms at the Nalanda Conference Center are the most comfortable with spotless ensuite bathrooms and basic amenities (non-air-conditioned rooms from Rs 2,500; air-conditioned rooms from Rs 3,500, less if you join an Isla programme). There is a cascading white邦sangrivala at the entrance, spacious public areas, an open, airy, aesthetic use of dark wood, and beautiful plants and lawns, this is a well-designed, aesthetic space. At the Naithal and Aakram rooms you get a basic, clean, functional space with twin beds and attached bathrooms. There are also suites and other accommodation for larger families/groups on campus (non-A/C from Rs 1,500; A/C from Rs 1,800-5,000). All room rates include both meals at the Naithal Hall (to book accommodation email islahouse@islahousefoundation.org).

Meals at the centre are a co-everyone affair. I was introduced to a whole new way of eating. Quite simply, in this place you only eat twice a day: at 10 or 10.45 a.m. and 7 or 7.45 p.m. Most residents and visitors eat at the Bhikshu Hall. Seating is on long mats lined up on the floor and those performing the aarti, or meditating for the day come around serving salad, rice, dal, veggies, and a millet porridge. It’s such an Indian fare that’s hearty and tasty. A not too spicy version is available and portions are unlimited; you can eat as much as you want. Once done, everyone washes their own stainless steel plate and glass in the very clean washing area and places them on the dish racks provided.

Only Inner Engineering programme participants eat at Nalanda. On day one, I overate at the morning meal and felt lousy so I went for a walk instead of attending the inner engineering programme. On day two I ate normally and found I had a slight rambling at 5 p.m. To stave off the munchies I ended up getting a fresh juice at the Poppy Vegetarian (open 4:10 a.m. to 7:30 p.m.). This is a large gazebo area with various stalls catering to day visitors and to anyone else who needs a little sandwich, dough, jack, or snack in between.

THE VITALS

The Isla Yoga Center is situated a 30 km 90 minute drive from Coimbatore before airport. From the airport to the ashram cost Rs 1,200 one way (innerengineering.org) and ashramfoundation.org.

WHERE TO STAY

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