THE LURE OF ISHA

A new spiritual sanctuary, ISHA
YOGA is drawing serious local and international following

By Namrata Zakaria

The lure seems ever-present. For a long hour, straight from
the airport, the road that takes me to my destination is a
single-lane stretch piping through the city of Coimbatore.
The city is dotted with gift shops called "Fancy" and Internet cafés
called "Browsing." This could be Aurangabad or Kanyakumari or another
city—the world is blander in India than elsewhere.
The irony isn't to be missed. I am on my way to meet a fashion
legend, a blue-chip New Yorker and an Indophile—Donna Karan.
Her working woman's 7-essentials wardrobe has made her the
Coco Chanel of our generation. She is also a famed yoga and
holistic practitioner.

Is it wise for us to use the word "Isaswami"? It lends an air of
mysticism and divinity to the scene. In any case, the road is
deliberately winding, and it is clear that the destination is
not a simple city destination.

The road leads to what seems like an oasis. I have arrived at
the Isha Yoga Centre (plainly the Isha Ashram), at the foothills
of the Velliangiri Mountains. My jaw drops and my breath is
stolen. It looks like a beautiful resort—like an expensive and
beautiful resort.

Karan is here for the first time—he's a guest of Sadhguru Jaggi
 Vasudev who has met for the first time in New York last year. "He
is a rock star, the coolest guy I've ever met," she will tell me over
our cumbice lunch tomorrow.

Tonight is the black night of Mahashivratri, the holiest night in
the Hindu calendar, and my first encounter with Sadhguru. He
is on stage for his 6:00 P.M. to 6:00 A.M. discourse. In his audience
are his kids followers—this is the largest congregation after the
Mata Amritanandamayi Mehta. Most are ordinary folk, followers from near and far.
At the front is Karan, in a sari, jasmine in her hair that's
rolled into a neat bun. With her are advertising guru Prakash Kadarkar
and his wife, Mitali (their youngest son goes to the Isha Home School here.) There is also Bollywood
songwriter Prasoon Joshi and his wife, actor Mbps Suresh and Dheeraj Bhatwadi, and Oscar-nominated
filmmaker Shekhar Kapur.

He is a rock star, the coolest guy I've ever met," says Donna
Karan about Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev.

Ashram in Pune has an Indian mystic enjoyed such fans. The
Rolls Royce-collecting Rajnesh had Vinoth Kanna, the achingly
handsome star of Hindi movies, give up his celebrity life and spend
a few years at his ashram. The Beatles were fans too, as were several
international celebrities.

Isa seems to take over from where Osbo wanted. It is the new
black for those seeking Nirvana in a well-packaged bottle. The inner
engineering seeking glitzy scenes come here now. Like Rajneesh,
Sadhguru speaks to a modern audience. His discourses are interwoven
with jokes and delivered with rhetoric.

Many from the Indian fashion crowd are drawn to Isha Yoga, Panet
Nanda, the former CEO of the Satya Paul label and a spiritual seeker,
has been living at the Ashram as a teacher and volunteer for years
now. The Isha Yoga Centre in Delhi is built on his uncle's land.

Designers Tarun Tahiliani, Payal Pratap, Aruna Chaudhuri, Pankaj
Ahuja (of Pankaj and Nidhi), Nardita, Bani, and designer Nandan
Jayakrishnan, and choreographer Ananya Birla Bedi are among firm
believers of Isha Yoga.

Photographer Tarun Khiwal is another. He says, "If you count
the millions of followers of Sadhguru, the fashion industry is a very
small per cent. But when you find a guru who can really unlock you,
there will surely be many believers. Because you cannot deny what
you have experienced."

Sadhguru is one of the most modern practitioners of yoga, a
universally accepted science of breathing, stretching, and meditating
that leads to physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Sadgurus
yoga is profound and pragmatic, his excellent oratory skills have won
him international renown—he has spoken at UNESCO and is a
regular at the World Economic Forum.

Of his many courses, his inner-engineering is the most popular. It
consists of 21 minutes of meditation-type breathing, and has courses
all over India and the rest of the world.
Payal Pratap Singh did the inner-engineering course with Sadhguru last year. A young mother and a new professional, the designer says Sadhguru’s 21-minute kriyas are easy to do and maintain. “In a busy schedule, it doesn’t demand too much time. Anyone can do it. It helps me focus and energises me throughout the day. I did it at a time when I had too much on my plate and it helped me stay calm and prioritise,” she says.

Scenographer Sumant Jayakrishnan says he was “a-religious and not into gurus at all”, when Tarun Tahiliani dragged him to a session in New Delhi. “I felt like I had walked into a farmhouse party,” he laughs. But he was proselytised quickly. “I never miss my 21-minutes today.”

Moreover, Coimbatore’s Isha Ashram looks like a giant Good earth store. It’s an architectural marvel—Indian and modern at the same time. I’m told it’s been designed by Sadhguru himself. The epicenter of this place is the Dhyana Lingam, a yogic temple. It is a large dome structure within which lies a 13-ft long, 9-inch wide mercury-based lingam, the largest in the world. Worshippers here climb a stepladder behind the lingam to offer milk and flowers, before they sit down, face the lingam, feel the inescapable vibration of energy in this orotund space, and meditate. Speaking is not allowed. There is nothing to distract you from the sheer beauty of the edifice, its contemporary ziggurat is alluring.

“I came here to see the linga,” says Rajesh Pratap Singh, who claims he “chases lingas all over the world.” “What draws me to Isha is the amazing architecture of the place—it’s so Zen-like.”

The Theerthakund is a consecrated pool of water that is energised by a smaller lingam made of solidified mercury. The women’s temple here is separate from the men’s. This building is awesome too—it is embedded 35 ft under the ground, and its ceiling is painted with beautiful murals. You shower and change into a strapless peticoat, and take your holy dip. The women in the pool seem to love it, smiling at each others like swimming apsaras.

The Linga Bhairavi temple is an homage to the Divine Feminine, symbolically in the shape of an equilateral triangle. This Devi temple is what reached out to Bahl Bedi the most. “It completely transformed me, and I wasn’t the spiritual sort at all,” she says of her first visit here.

Sadhguru is on stage for his 6:00 P.M to 6:00 A.M discourse. In his audience are six lakh followers—the largest congregation after the Maha Kumbh.

Bahl Bedi met the Sadhguru first at her friend Vivek Sahni’s house, and was taken aback by his long beard. But eventually she began to learn how “regular” he was. “He plays golf; drives like a maniac, rides a bike... he’s like any one of us,” she says. Payal Pratap adds: “He’s really well-read and with-it. He can talk about the cultures and politics of any country.”

It is this very normalcy in life that attracts the young and the cynical to Isha. It is an open system, you don’t have to believe in God or spirituality, but in your own inner strengths which can be developed and sustained through meditation. Sadhguru often says: “A humanity which has done nothing for its inner well-being—how can it create external well-being?”

For an industry reputed to be obsessed with the external, the inner journey offers new thrills.