



Healing in Luxury

In her pursuit of wellness, **Mala Barua** has traversed the globe in search of the best spas and lifestyle retreats that promise healthy living in the most luxurious environs. Here, she highlights some of the most lavish hotels where you can relax and rejuvenate in.

rejuvenation amidst history

If you have never had an Aman experience, you should. It's über luxury. Set against the backdrop of the 9th-century Buddhist temples of Borobudur and Mendut in Java, Indonesia, Amanjiwo is a delight. Architecturally, the hotel blends in beautifully with the natural environment of this small Javanese town and everything about the hotel is in line with the local art, culture and cuisine. A rare woman, Dharma teacher Khandro Trinlay Chodon led our retreat on the Four Thoughts. Her angelic voice chanting peace mantras filled the hotel with positive vibrations and those who attended were moved to tears at her simple teachings on love, compassion and impermanence. I love Aman's style. One morning we did a Five Elements meditation on top of Dagi Hill overlooking the Borobudur temple and Aman surprised us with a full-fledged picnic breakfast under the trees. In the evening, a traditional Pijat massage given by a masseur from a local family of healers, was followed by a candlelight puja with

From top: A walkway at Amanjiwo in Java, Indonesia; a yoga class in progress at Ananda in the Himalayas, in Rishikesh. Opposite, from left: The beautiful ruins at Machu Picchu; at Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi, in Thailand.



beautiful floral mandalas. My villa was assigned a private butler who regularly laid out the yoga mats on the traditional Indonesian *bale* for Khandro-la and me. My bed had the softest pillows I had ever sunk my head into. Definitely wellness in luxury! Be prepared to be showered by rose petals strewn by little Indonesian girls in sarongs! amanjiwo.com

pampering in the himalayas

Ananda in the Himalayas is India's only luxurious destination spa. The location in the foothills of the Himalayas is unique, overlooking the sacred town of Rishikesh, home to yoga and Ayurveda, and a few minutes drive away from the sacred waters of the Ganges. As you arrive at Ananda, the tone is set when you are welcomed with an *aarti* and a sacred rosary (*rudraksh* mala). A full programme of yoga, meditation and fitness is designed for each guest. The expansive spa area plays the healing mantra "Maha Mrityunjay" all-day long and offers guests a reflexology walk, a sauna, steam and hot green tea while you lounge in the recliners overlooking the valley. My programme included a long three-hour trek up the mountains to a special tantric

temple, an experience to open my heart through the Hridayakash meditation in the intimacy of Ma Anandamayi's (a born mystic) room, a cleansing of my body with Himalayan stones blessed by the high Buddhist lamas, and the famous Ananda Fusion which is a treatment co-created by the therapist and myself! The evenings were spent listening to interesting discourses on the esoteric matters of metaphysics and life provided by Vedanta teachers.

My premium room came with an expanded view of the Rishikesh valley—a true indulgence. So before tucking into my comfortable bed, I lay in my rose-petal filled bathtub, by candlelight, and watched the town light up like a starry sky on land! Don't be surprised if you get addicted to the Ananda signature fragrance. anandaspa.com

eco indulgence in machu picchu

Cleverly nestled into a mountainside near the River Urubamba, Inkatererra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel is a little hidden gem. Home to a variety of birds from the cloud forests, 4,000 species of orchids, and a few lost bears that they nurture and support, this intimate luxury hotel in a sprawling Andean-style village requires guests to follow stone paths to their whitewashed casitas. My large sprawling villa came with its own private open-air Jacuzzi, and a fireplace to lounge in front of. The excitement and anticipation of visiting Machu Picchu, one of the most sacred sites in the world,

was enhanced by an intense ceremony of gratitude to Pachamama (or Mother Earth), conducted by a local shaman, on the eve of our visit. These wonderful souls, the shamans, so connected with nature and the spirit, made us feel equally closer to the earth, water, mountains, fire as well as the products of these elements, which sustain us. A traditional herbal massage in their Unu Spa, followed by a detox in the Andean sauna (which was a straw hut lined with Eucalyptus leaves with hot Andean stones in the centre from which the steam arose) made for an unforgettable experience. I ended the day in the Jacuzzi watching the unfamiliar Southern hemisphere sky. The whole experience relaxed and prepared me to absorb the energy of these famous ruins, the next day, with heightened sensitivity. This retreat is perfect for eco lovers as they can enjoy a 100 percent carbon neutral stay in this luxurious hotel as well as spot Peru's national bird, the bright red Cock of the Rock. inkaterra.com

royal relaxation

If the Mandarin Oriental in Bangkok is the grande dame of Thailand then the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi in Chiang Mai has to be the jewel in the crown. It is breathtakingly beautiful. Tisna Rosen, the wellness director had previously been part of the Chiva Som team and understands wellness at a deeper level. The hotel is built in the style of a palace of the Lanna kingdoms of Burma

and northern Thailand. The beautiful reception area of their sprawling spa has delicate lattice work on the pillars and is decorated with northern Thai ceramics, pottery and furnishings. It is unlike any other spa I have been to. Their treatment rooms are all elegant suites replete with baths, steam rooms, lounge areas and dressing rooms. Over and above that, they have an elegant watsu pool and golden mosaic steam room/rassoul, a hydro area, two large swimming pools, yoga rooms and a well-equipped fitness centre. The hotel complex has its own shopping village as well as all the traditional craftsmen available to enable guests to paint their own umbrellas or make their own pottery. My double-storied villa overlooked the rice fields and the infinity pool, and featured a four-poster bed and a huge area for relaxing in my circular Jacuzzi. To call it an attached bathroom would truly be an understatement. There was a similar Jacuzzi downstairs in the open platform of my lounge area which I enjoyed using at night to watch the brightly lit seven-tiered golden palace (representing the seven steps to Nirvana), which shone like a precious Jewel. Be prepared to have your body scanned for the Energy Field Imaging and see the colours of your otherwise invisible aura. mandarinoriental/chiangmai ✚

Mala Barua is the founder of Mystic-Asia (mystic-asia.in), and organizes wellness retreats to help you improve the quality of your life.



FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF MALA BARUA; COURTESY OF MANDARIN ORIENTAL

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF MALA BARUA; COURTESY OF ANANDA IN THE HIMALAYAS