

THE WAY OF THE DRILL

a true account of creating a homestay yoga retreat in India

by Philippa Asher

LONDON TO INDIA

It took a whole year after we were married, before Mahesh was granted a settlement visa to the UK. His tourist visa was denied too, which resulted in us having a full-on Hindu wedding in Bangalore, without any of my family present. The astrologer said that the most auspicious day to tie the knot, was on Friday (the day of Venus). I happened to be sitting at my desk in London when I heard the news and couldn't expect my family and university mates to drop everything and fly five thousand miles to join me. My fabulous Dutch friend did though and managed to keep me calm when several Indian ladies were vociferously arguing in the temple's side room, about how to fold the pleats in my sari. I'd never worn a sari before, nor in fact attended an Indian wedding. Nothing can really prepare you for the unexpected and baffling journey that India will take you on. My sister calls it 'the way of drill', but more about that later.

I had no idea that the Ashtanga practice would eventually draw me away from my fabulous Soho media job (which entailed going to several gigs and movies a week, after-show parties, working hard and generally having a lot of fun with creative hedonists). I didn't expect to have to sell my North London flat either, but when I changed careers (to become a full-time Ashtanga yoga teacher), my salary wasn't enough to cover my mortgage and living expenses. One idea was to use the money from the sale of my only asset, to buy land in India and construct a fabulous homestay yoga retreat.

I had been exposed to classical Indian dance, music, art, architecture, food and yoga postures since childhood, but Mahesh had warned me that life in India would be hard. Even though I'd spent many years studying at the Krishna Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute in Mysore, the culture shock of actually moving there was massive. It's one thing to hang out with Westerners in an upmarket neighbourhood that panders to foreigners' needs; it is quite something else living in India full-time, working on a project with locals and trying to get things done. There are two Indias residing in one country: Traditional India (happily rooted in the 19th century, with antiquated values, beliefs and practices) and Modern India, where anything is possible. The complication is that they are intertwined, dichotomous and contradictory.

We arrived in Bangalore in 2011. I wanted to see a lot more of the country, before deciding upon where to build our Ashtanga yoga homestay retreat. We spent a few jolly weeks exploring North India, lapping up the cultural diversity and noticing significant differences from the South. Rajasthan was particularly beautiful with its remarkable architecture, forts and palaces. We did find North India quite aggressive though and Mahesh began to realise that his proficiency in several South Indian languages and his understanding of how things work in South India, might make the South a better choice for us. He was particularly irked when presented with a glass of instant Nescafé, after having ordered a South Indian filter coffee. "Sir, this is what they drink in South India."

South India feels a lot softer and more easy-going than the North and of course the food and climate are amazing. We'd both explored the South over numerous road trips, so had a pretty good idea of what each State was like and how difficult it might be to set up a business. There are twenty-nine States in India and each has its own language, customs and rules. Being from Karnataka and knowing the landscape, language, laws, locals'

mindsets and how everything works, Mahesh felt that it would undoubtedly be the smartest place to create our business.

Over the next six months he visited numerous plots of land all over Karnataka. I wasn't allowed to go, because if the agent saw a gori, then the land price would be quadrupled. Mahesh filmed and photographed each location and reported back. Our criteria was that we needed fertile land with a water source, that is easily accessible, not too far from a town, that is in stunning hill land, has the 'wow' factor, breathtaking views and hundreds of trees and plants. We'd almost given up the search when Mahesh telephoned one morning and said "I've found it."

BRICKS AND MORTAR

The Western Ghats are spectacular. We drove through Sakleshpur as the sun was rising and Mahesh made me wear a blindfold as we meandered up the track towards our soon-to-be land. I removed my eye-wear as the car stopped. 'Wow!' It was truly magnificent. The panoramic views of the Western Ghats and bustle of life from the surrounding coffee estates took my breath away. We were in paradise. There were hundreds of trees, flowers, birds, butterflies, plants, coffee bushes, black pepper creepers, fruit trees and vegetable crops surrounding a small lake!

We'd both fallen in love with the place, but of course acquiring any land in India is a very complicated and drawn-out process and even more so when it is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Nevertheless, we decided to press on with construction. Our vision was to create a beautiful rustic farmhouse (in keeping with rural India), using local materials, reclaimed pillars, window frames, doors and crafted artefacts. Because so many wonderful old buildings are being pulled down in India (due to family disputes and people wanting to sell-up to properly developers), it's possible to pick up charming wooden doors, carved pillars, fabulous shuttered window frames and terracotta roof tiles for next to nothing. We both agreed that we wanted to design the buildings ourselves, rather than paying a haughty architect lots of money to come up with something unbefitting. I loved the idea of having a sweeping veranda all around the house and enormous bedrooms with heaps of natural light. Mahesh wanted a spacious kitchen and sizeable ensuite bathrooms. We both agreed that a church-like living room would be fun. So that's what we built. The old farmhouse that was already on the land became our living room and the walls were raised to over twenty feet, allowing us to create a picturesque tiled-roof, which slopes over our fifteen foot terrace. Around the living room we added three large bedrooms, bathrooms, a kitchen and a huge veranda (part of which is now a dining area with a fireplace). My yoga shala looks out over the Western Ghats and next to Mahesh's outdoor kitchen is a fabulous wood-fired oven. We built a lovely cottage for guests and plan to construct a couple more. We have named our coffee estate NIRVRTA (which means 'joyful' in Sanskrit) and designed our homestay yoga retreat with the intention of creating an idyllic space in nature for free-spirited, like-minded individuals, to escape from urban living, practise Ashtanga yoga, feel connected and to revitalise the body, mind and spirit. The next phase will be to make a wonderful swimming pool at the top of the hill, which looks out over the Western Ghats.

One of the most striking aspects of the Western Ghats, is its lush vegetation. For three months of the year there is torrential rain, so no construction work can happen. The other major challenge in South India is to find reliable, skilled workers, who will actually show up. We realised pretty early on that local construction labourers aren't dependable. They'd promise to come, but never appear. In the end we had to ferry a team of guys from

Bangalore to Sakleshpur, but they would only stay for two weeks at a time and then need at least a month off. As a result, it took several years to build the house, cottage, outdoor kitchen, auxiliary buildings and to design the landscaping. The work ethic can be quite lackadaisical in India, with an overwhelming sense of self-deserving, without actually making any effort to do anything. If Mahesh was not project-managing every moment, our workers would literally sit and do nothing and if he was not overseeing them they would magnificently manage to do the job wrong. One day I explained to the mason that the shala floor must to be level. I took my Stanley tape measure and gave him the exact specs. I had to pop back to Mysore for a few days and when I returned the shala floor was dramatically sloping. "Ramesh! The floor is sloping, it must be level!" "Madam, for water drainage." "What water drainage, Ramesh?" It took another three days to re-do the floor. The plumber fitted the waste-water-pipe outlet along an upward slope, so the water couldn't drain away. The shower heads were fitted eight feet high, so only a giant could reach them. The electrician's make-shift wiring, blew up my lovely flat-screen TV and the painters splattered so much paint on our beautiful grey-stone veranda pillars and walls, that we ended up having to paint them too. The plumber dropped a hammer in my bathtub and cracked it and the workers forgot to remove the enormous water tank (that was being stored in the house), before building the final wall around it ... These are just a few examples of jobs that had to be re-done under constant supervision. Of course construction workers like to be paid by the day, rather than the project! After the carpenters put up more wonky shelves and I rolled an orange from one end to the other, I had a bit of a meltdown. Miraculously Mahesh's uncle had been working with two very talented carpenters from Bihar and they agreed to help us out. They looked at the two kitchens that needed fitting, under-bed drawers and bathroom cupboards that needed making and gave us a quote for the whole project. Two weeks later they had finished and their craftsmanship was impeccable.

The workers did seem to enjoy themselves though. Being in nature in such a stunning part of India, must have been a welcome escape from overpopulated, polluted and noisy Bangalore. On the first day of each monsoon the team would stop everything, run around in the rain and bury each other in the muddy earth. It's quite wonderful to watch people embracing the natural rhythm of nature with such care-free aplomb. Thankfully we have a beautiful lawn now, so the Glastonbury antics can't be replicated by our guests!

INCREDIBLE INDIA

My parents agreed to visit us in India, once the house was almost completed. I was keen to drive them around, so decided to embark upon Indian driving lessons and a test. I had to take my 'provisional test', before I was allowed to sign up for lessons, so went along to the Road Traffic Office in Mysore. Upon asking for a copy of the Highway Code, I was swiftly ushered into a room, where a uniformed man starting pointing at a medley of pictures on the wall, expecting me to know what they symbolised. I proffered a few guesses: warning, bullock carts; order, tongas prohibited; warning, unguarded level crossing ahead; warning, deers crossing etc. The portly man started flapping his right arm, which baffled me somewhat. He told me to copy him, so I obediently flapped too. He helpfully explained that these were the hand signals for slowing down, turning right, turning left and over-taking. "But what are the car's indicators and brake lights for?" I naively asked. He clearly wasn't happy about my insolence and grunted indignantly. Miraculously I passed my provisional test and booked my first driving lesson. I was allowed ten, one-hour classes before my exam. I learned to drive in India, in a Maruti 800. There were no rear-view or wing mirrors in the car. This made me very nervous, but my instructor assured me that it was safer this way. "Focus only on what is ahead of you" he advised. He also made me turn right, way before the actual turnings; prohibited me from stopping at roundabouts;

encouraged me to crawl along at a snail's pace in the fast lanes and reverse into main roads. When I refused to go through a red light, he yelled "Madam, this is India!" The day of my test came and Mahesh and I arrived at the RTO at 9am. We joined an already enormous queue and waited for several hours in the sun. Around lunchtime a voice shouted "You foreigner, simulated test." I was appalled. I hadn't sat in a tiny car for ten hours with my incongruous driving instructor, only to take a pretend test. After a heated conversation in Kannada, I was led to another queue, where there were over a hundred people waiting by a dozen learner-driver vehicles. We were standing on a busy main road in Mysore accompanied by cows, lorries, bikes and rickshaws. The cars were parked in a line by the side of the road and each examinee, had to elbow their way into a driver's seat. It took me a long time to summon the confidence to barge my way into a car and when I did I was told to sit down and fold my arms. There was a hefty Indian man in the passenger seat, who had his own set of foot pedals. Although this car did actually have rear view and wing mirrors, they were angled for the passenger's use. I didn't even get to start the car as the engine was already running when I clambered in. Our vehicle pulled out and the hefty man drove me around the block and then reversed parked into the space from whence we began. All twelve cars were following the same procedure. Over the road, underneath a large tree sat a gruff examiner, whom none of us personally met. He would occasionally look up to assess the chaos. Three months later, a driving licence arrived in the post for me. Mahesh decided that he would be my parents' chauffeur.

So a few days before Christmas my Mum, Dad, sister and her husband arrived. They were our first guests at NIRVRTA, so we saw their visit as a trial run for the retreat. The journey from the airport to Sakleshpur gave my family a lively welcome to the country. They were greeted by a cacophony of persistent horn-hoots, cows languidly walking along the road, helmet-less families precariously balancing on flimsy scooters and drivers demonstrating their prowess in reckless abandon. Luckily we only had to have one loo stop, but nevertheless my Mum managed to chance upon the most ghastly squat lavatory in the whole of India and had already bolted the door before I could show her the fabulous Western potty in the adjacent cubicle.

We happily arrived at NIRVRTA in one piece and any colourful events from the journey were soon forgotten, when my family saw the splendour of our homestay yoga retreat. It was so heart-warming to see the expressions on their faces as the images from the photos that I had sent them became real. We had actually built an enormous farmhouse, a cottage, an outdoor kitchen, a workshop and had transformed five acres of wilderness into a working coffee and black pepper estate, with a wonderful garden, fruit trees, organic vegetable patch, lawn and lily pond. They were truly impressed and began to adjust to a leisurely life of sitting on the boundless veranda reading, going for fabulous walks across the neighbouring coffee estates, chasing friendly spiders around the bathtub and having dinner on our banquet table, next to a roaring log fire. On one of our walks my Mum excitedly discovered an enormous scorpion and stood proudly next to it for a photoshoot. This must have been an auspicious day, as moments later we chanced upon two eight foot rat snakes mating. Paying no attention to their bewitched spectators, they elegantly danced and writhed around in perfect unison, demonstrating the mesmerising magnificence of nature. We planted new trees around the estate and dropped coins by each root, for good luck. Mahesh became a whizz at IT support, as my octogenarian parents played with their MacBook Pro, iPhone 6s and iPad. We even enjoyed a few Kingfishers around a full-moon bonfire and miraculously missed (by minutes), the parading of a trumpeting male elephant, as he walked past our house from the forest. There's never a dull moment in India!

Naturally our fancy Aga-style cooking range decided to stop working the day before Christmas Eve and no one could fix it until the new year. Not wanting to miss having our traditional English Christmas lunch, we decided to venture to Mysore feed our faces and celebrate the birth of Christ. My Dad suggested that it might be a good idea to get Mahesh's electric drill fixed in Mysore (as he was rather perturbed that not much work had been happening since their arrival and wanted my brother-in-law to put up more shelves). We loaded the car with Christmas crackers, presents, a tree, decorations, wine, cranberry sauce, mince pies and party clothes and merrily drove off to Mysore, leaving the electric drill in the veranda.

Mahesh phoned Rajana (the owner of the coffee estate next to ours) and in exchange for a bottle of rum, asked him to pop the drill in a box and hand it (along with our name and phone number) to the driver of the next bus to Mysore. This should have been an ingenious plan, except that Rajana didn't write our name on the box, nor did he take down the driver's mobile number, or the bus's registration number. So ... our drill went back and forth to Mysore and Sakleshpur for three days, before Rajana managed to locate the driver at Sakleshpur bus station and gave him Mahesh's phone number. On December 28th Mahesh successfully met up with the driver at Mysore bus station, who happily reunited him with our drill. "The way of the drill" soon became an affectionate metaphor to describe anything whose destiny is out of our hands (but will hopefully be alright, in the end)! When we arrived back in Sakleshpur after our Christmas and New Year celebrations, two people from the cooking range company (who had traveled since 5am to be at our place by 9am), were waiting for us in the veranda. They leapt up to greet us and happily repaired the oven.

CREATING A YOGA RETREAT

The months flew by as we worked against the clock to get the retreat ready for our first guests in May. The workers came back and forth from Bangalore (taking off heaps of time for the numerous Indian festivals that occur every month), but worked from sunrise until nightfall, to finish the remaining masonry and electrical work, plumbing, carpentry, painting, landscaping and clearing of the land. We had countless power cuts, which meant that anything that required an electrical current could only be done in short bursts, but magically the retreat began to take shape. We planted grass for the lawn, heaps of bougainvilleas and colourful flowers and filled the pond with lilies and reeds. We even took a trip to Mahesh's grandfather's village, where he commandeered an enormous clay grain-pot, which would not look out of place in the British Museum. Curious as to why a Modern Indian would have use for an ancient village storage receptacle, several of his granny's neighbours appeared and offered him their clay pots too. We gingerly loaded the van with their gifts and drove back to NIRVRTA.

One of the most exciting aspects of building your own homestay retreat, is that you can design it exactly as you wish. We have been acquiring a collection of interesting antiques and rustic curiosities from all over the world for several years, but it was as if the house was specifically created to accommodate our treasures. We couldn't have known this as it took over three years before the contents of my North London flat, finally arrived in Sakleshpur. We had to go over to Chennai to meet the crate (containing our beloved possessions), deal with customs and check that everything was there. Three boxes were missing and of course they were the only ones that I particularly cared about. They contained my antique furniture. After numerous phone calls and a lot of detective work, we established that two boxes were in Delhi and the other one was in Mumbai. No one could

quite understand why. Six weeks later our eighty seven boxes (coming from Chennai, Delhi and Mumbai) arrived together. We then had to keep them in storage for a couple of years, whilst we finished building the house. Eventually a van carrying our goodies arrived in Sakleshpur and Mahesh and I turned into small children, as we eagerly ripped open packaging and discovered belongings that we had long since forgotten about. Miraculously everything fitted into our homestay perfectly and nothing looked out of place. Artefacts from all over the world now adorn our living room and even the black clay grain-pot stands magnificently next to the majestic wooden front door (which has distressed-brass handles, that resemble two figures in Setu Bandhasana). The other eight clay pots are scattered around the retreat and feel quite at home next to old wooden pillars, benches and sculptures the we have acquired.

A week before the guests arrived, the cook that we had organised to come from Mysore, rang Mahesh to tell us that his boss wanted him to dog-sit for the next three weeks. I couldn't believe it. We had visitors coming from all over the world and there was no cook. Mahesh said that he could do it, but we needed him to manage the retreat and to oversee everything. I went to bed in tears. At seven o'clock the next morning there was a knock at the front door and a tiny woman in a large shirt said "I think you need some help." She had already cleared a huge area of flat land half way up the hill, which was carpeted with weeds. "Meditation area" she informed us. She had gathered all the leaves from the lawn and created a compost heap at one end of the organic vegetable garden. She then asked us if she could clean the house and after doing an immaculate job, cooked us dinner. Who was this Fairy Godmother and who had sent her? She was a widow named Saroja, whose children had left home and who had a gift for using her initiative. Saroja came every day, helping us clean, tidy, cook and organise the kitchen, guest rooms and shala. She made heaps of suggestions about how things should be run and had basically taken us under her wing.

Obviously we needed to increase the size of the team during the retreat and Saroja took it upon herself to recruit appropriate helpers. The community spirit was wonderful, as everyone mucked in and pulled together to ensure that our soft launch retreat at ASHTANGA NIRVRTA was a joyful success. What we had created was not only a fabulous sanctuary in nature (for Ashtanga practitioners to immerse themselves in every aspect of yoga), but also a traditional-style Indian homestay yoga retreat that the locals were proud of.

ASHTANGA NIRVRTA

Sunrise on the first day of the retreat was upon us and Mahesh's father appeared in a dazzling white dhoti, to offer puja to our magnificent hand-carved stone Ganesha statue. We laid down beautiful jamkhana rugs in the yoga shala and the aroma of sandalwood incense infused the air. After several hours of chanting soothing Sanskrit mantras and thoughtfully offering flowers and puja to our idol, ASHTANGA NIRVRTA was ready for the arrival of our guests.

One of the things that I am most proud of as an Ashtanga yoga teacher, is the students who choose to study with me. So far I have been blessed with wonderful, easy-going, receptive, fun, intelligent, hard working and unassuming adults, who are a joy to work with. The guests at our launch retreat were no exception. We had delightful visitors from North and South India, Europe, North Africa and North America, all of whom Saroja happily welcomed with a garland of flowers.

The concept of a homestay yoga retreat is quite different from the big commercial retreats, where heaps of practitioners receive little personal attention. Guests stay in our home and treat it as their home. I like to teach small groups and give students as much individual guidance as possible (similar to how Guruji worked with us, at the old Laxmipuram Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute). Being in stunning nature means that guests can feel truly connected and free themselves from the clutches of urban living. It is an idyllic way to practise yoga.

Every morning Saroja would create rangoli patterns outside the main doors and put fresh flowers on the Ganesha statue in the yoga shala. The group would leisurely arrive (often with fresh coffee in hand), ready for asana class. From Sundays to Thursdays I would lead guided self-practice and on Fridays we enjoyed a Sanskrit-counted led Primary class. Although we worked incredibly hard, we managed to have plenty of laughter. My accidentally saying “sat, exhale, backward dog” was a particular favourite, as was Avi’s “my legs have fallen off.” Every afternoon we would indulge in workshops on asana technique and enjoy long walks when we would discuss yoga philosophy, history and have ‘conference’. On clear evenings (as the sun set), we would sit on the hill where Saroja had cleared the land, for pranayama, chanting and meditation. Following Guruji’s tradition of taking Saturday (the day of Saturn) as a holiday, we embarked on a spot of sight-seeing. The 12th Century Hoysala stone temples of Belur and Halebid, are not only enthralling but demonstrate a feat of architectural and sculptural magnificence. Exquisite and intricate carvings of Hindu gods, entwined bodies, emblems, creatures and symbols, cover every inch of the temples which took over one hundred years to complete. Our journey back to the retreat was rather memorable too. One of the guests wasn’t quite ready to leave the restaurant where we were devouring delicious chats, so we didn’t depart until dark. A huge storm blew up and the howling winds, rain and thunder bolts caused a tree to fall across the main road back to Sakleshpur. Traffic was diverted via a small country lane (which had no street lighting) and of course a tree had fallen there too. We would have been stuck for hours, had the driver of our jeep not known about a farmland short cut. We arrived back at NIRVRA Estate later than expected and ravenous.

One of the reasons that I was so upset that the cook from Mysore couldn’t come, was that I thought the guests would want Western food (which he could create). I couldn’t have been more wrong. “You’re a homestay retreat. We want to eat what you eat” the guests told me. This was music to my ears as we feasted on mangoes, papayas, bananas, pomelos, melons, pineapples and granola after practice each morning and delved into a spectacular offering of South Indian breakfasts every lunchtime. Avi charmed the ladies who prepared food for us, into creating delectable treats reminiscent of his mother’s cooking. After dark we indulged in South Indian vegetarian thali-style dishes such as local vegetable curries, thoran, salads, red rice, akki rotis, dal, channa, rajma, sambar and papad. I can’t pretend that our secret stash of beer wasn’t discovered by our razor-sharp guests and enjoyed by all, with roasted ground nuts and banana chips on Friday evenings!

Before the guests departed they asked for bags of our freshly ground coffee to take home. We were sad to say goodbye, but I’m happy that they will keep coming back to ASHTANGA NIRVRA. The launch was a wonderful success and we eagerly await our future retreats from October to May each year.

I have come to expect the unexpected in India and have surrendered to the fact that yes usually means no, nothing is as it seems and if there is a complicated way of doing something, it will be embraced (often with no outcome at all). I do not claim to understand

Incredible India, or the logic which determines many people's actions, but the light, the colours, the exotic aromas, the smiles, the delicious fruit, cuisine, stunning nature and constant assault on the senses, perpetually captivate me and make the Magical Motherland a place to behold.

India is extraordinary and is the perfect place for our Ashtanga yoga homestay retreat. England is my home and it is important for me to connect with my family, friends and English culture. I miss all that is familiar, the way people speak, our humour, rhyming slang, banter, irony, English newspapers, Sunday lunch, country pubs, walks on Hampstead Heath, the architecture in the City of London, the Thames, the café culture, stately homes, art galleries, museums, theatre, concerts, gigs, cinema, the variety of shops, selection of products, customer service, church bells and satirical British television and radio. Coming home every summer to teach in Europe, not only keeps me clear-headed, but has also paid for our living expenses in India these last five years. The yoga practice is about feeling connected, having a balanced life and being happy, healthy and peaceful. Spending half my time teaching Ashtanga yoga at our joyful retreat in the hills of South India and the rest of the year sharing the practice in England and Europe, not only allows me to stay connected to my roots, but (when the nights draw in and the sky turns grey) enables me to keep going back to the motherland of yoga, where everything is exotic, vibrant and mysterious.

ASHTANGA NIRVRTA is 100 miles NW of Mysore, in Karnataka. We run bespoke two and three week retreats from October to May each year: Ashtanga retreats with afternoon workshops; guided self-practice; Art of Adjusting Ashtanga Asana retreats. Philippa has learned the Primary, Intermediate, Advanced A and Advanced B Series directly from Guruji and Sharath and was Certified to teach by Guruji in 2008. www.nirvrta.com © 2016 Philippa Asher

