

Ayurveda Spreads Worldwide; Kerala Experience Still Special

By Suresh Menon

The Ayurveda system as practiced in God's Own Country is fast catching the fancy of the rich and famous all over the world. So much so that the state's famed ayurvedic health centers and five-star resorts offering rejuvenation treatment, massages and therapies for tired souls have sprung up not only in far-flung Indian cities but also in places like Brazil, Spain and so many other parts of the world.

However, foreigners who come all the way to Kerala to take ayurvedic massages and other therapies vouch for the fact that most Ayurvedic Spas found outside God's Own Country are probably superficial and really not connected with the philosophy of this ancient system of medicine. As Jean Baptiste Rabouan, a freelance photographer from France and writer Nicolas de Barry, after visiting Kerala to report about their Ayurveda experience and the traditional treatment methods practiced here, wrote in a monthly Paris-based magazine called *Grand Reportages*: "Nothing can be comparable to what we have seen and learnt here. It is the holistic approach of the traditional treatment that gives it the edge."

Kottakal is the oldest name in the business and it can be said that ayurveda owes its present status to Vaidya Ratnam P S Varrier of Kottakal in Malappuram district of northern Kerala. In 1902, it took him much intensive study, a lot of courage and persistence and a great deal of faith, to take the first step to revive a science that was jostled almost into non-existence. And for this unique contribution, P S Varrier was honored with Vaidya Ratnam (gem among physicians) in 1933. Thanks to his efforts, today Kerala has become the home of the ancient science of health and longevity.

Another well-known Ayurvedic treatment center in Kerala is the Vaidyaratnam Oushadhasala belonging to the Eledath Thaikattu Mooss family, renowned for its Ashtavaidya tradition. Vaidyaratnam Oushadhasala was started in 1941 by Ashtavaidyayan ET Neelakandhan Mooss. No doubt there are scores of other authentic ayurvedic centers across Kerala and the ayurveda system as practiced there have also contributed a great deal towards elevating this ancient way of life into a modern lifestyle statement.

Why is ayurveda becoming the rage and why in Kerala? The state's climate, forests and the cool monsoon season are ideal for ayurveda's curative and restorative packages. Its increasing popularity is attributed to the fact that ayurveda not only cures diseases but also teaches how to achieve perfect health. Many people turn to ayurveda to de-stress, detoxicate and in some cases to lose weight. Due to increasing popularity of this ancient system of medicine and with tourists having taken a penchant for oil massages, lately many fake practitioners have started setting up centers offering nothing more than an oil massage masquerading as ayurvedic treatment.

Emphasizing that treatment under them can be dangerous, a leading Ayurvedic speaking on condition of anonymity said, "There are some centers that claim to offer ayurvedic

treatment when all they do is play Indian music during regular massages.” With this traditional medicare becoming the rage, ayurveda is now being promoted even by luxury hotels and tourism promoters, where a team of doctors, yoga instructors and masseurs help the guests to unwind. They offer popular ayurvedic packages – a massage, some oil treatments a panchakarma therapy session and a few herbal products to take home along with the complimentary towel and dressing gown.

One such five-star resort is the Ayurveda Centre at the Taj Garden Retreat, Kumarakom, where the Prime Minister AB Vajpayee had spent a week during his winter sojourn in Kerala in 2001. But critics allege that what we get to see in many of luxury hotels and five-star resorts is ‘pseudo Ayurveda’ adapted to pander to the needs of celebrities and the Spa culture. However, the authenticity and effectiveness of any ayurvedic package should be judged from the results it achieves for you. A fruitful session is the one that leaves you absolutely relaxed, purified and feeling good as well as with pleasant feeling of being stretched all ends. And with a long-lasting feeling of psycho-physiological well being.

Types of Oil Massages:

There are around 15 different kinds of treatment programmes on offer. Some of these therapies are:

SHIRODHARA: Oil is poured on forehead in continuous stream. This is good for nervous disorders such as migraine and headaches and for curing insomnia.

PIZHICHIL: Two to three liters of lukewarm herbal oils are applied and rubbed all over the body by trained therapists in a special rhythmic manner for 60-90 minutes. Those with arthritic problems go in for this treatment

NAVARAKIZHI: Massage with bundles of rice cooked in milk and herbs for toning muscles and imparting luster.

ELAKIZHI: Massage with bundles of fresh herbs, good for ‘weight reduction, rheumatism and others.

There are also other forms of treatment like **UZHICHCHAL, KIZHI, ABHAYANGAM AND AVAGHAHAM** all provided under professional medical supervision with separate facilities for both males and females.

What the massaging session involve?

The person is made to lie flat on his back on a narrow wooden table, sans clothes except a narrow strip of thin cotton.

What follows is quite an experience and very different from the ‘body massages’ offered at health Spas and beauty parlors. Two masseurs pound and pummel working in tandem. They start with the legs (each has one), move on towards the body, the arms, and then the head, moving up together. Then the person is made to turn over and the same procedure is repeated.

Cost:

A single sitting depending on the type of massage can cost between Rs. 600 to Rs. 5000. For treatment programmes ranging from 14 days to 42 days, the cost may vary from US\$585 to US\$1,500.