

CLASSIC INDIA

THE TOTAL GUIDE

Tigers, temples, G&Ts on the terrace – 23 pages of unforgettable experiences

In a land of so many possibilities, where do you start? Try right here: we've handpicked 21 magical moments, from the TAJ MAHAL AT DAWN (page 83) to MODERN MUMBAI AT MIDNIGHT (page 84). If you prefer the path less travelled, you'll love HIKING THE HIMALAYAN FOOTHILLS (page 70) or A YOGA RETREAT IN KARNATAKA (page 81). If you're a romantic, you'll adore RAJASTHAN'S PALACE HOTELS (page 62). Need more inspiration? Read on...



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANOM



**THE DAWN
PRAYERS MOMENT**
LAID-BACK LADAKH,
LITTLE TIBET

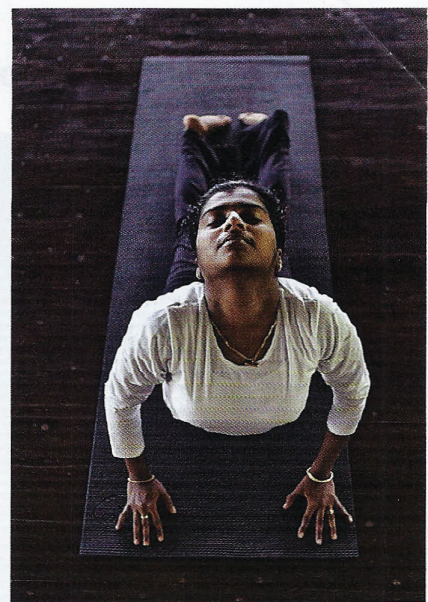
India may be home to a large Tibetan exile community based at Dharamsala (including the Dalai Lama), but for a real taste of Tibetan landscapes and culture, head for Ladakh, India's most remote and least populous destination. Long known as Little Tibet, it shares the language and religion of its big brother just across the border. Buddhist monks devote their lives to chanting and meditation, and Medieval monasteries dot the mountain ridges like fortresses, their traditions undisturbed by government interference. To many travellers Ladakh feels more authentically Tibetan than Tibet itself.

Unfortunately you will need to set the alarm clock. The highlight of any visit is a trip to a monastery at dawn to catch the early-morning

prayers as the monks assemble to chant and drink buttery tea in their ornate temples while a couple of the novices take to the roofs to blow the huge Tibetan horns known as *dungchen*. The deep rasping notes will run up and down your spine before rolling across the valley, over the fields of ripening barley, the swollen Indus river and the flat roofs of the houses where sheaves of hay are stacked for the coming winter – only to rebound off the mountains in a long reverberating echo.

INSIDER TIP: If coming by air, schedule a couple of extra days to acclimatise – you will be higher than 3,400m. Ladakh is only accessible in the summer months (June to September).

● Cox & Kings (0845 287 1493, www.coxandkings.co.uk) has a 17-day itinerary that brings you to Ladakh on the great Manali-Leh Himalayan Highway. It includes New Delhi, Amritsar, Dharamsala, Manali and three days in Ladakh from £2,269pp, with Heathrow flights.



THE 'OMM' MOMENT
SHREYAS RETREAT, NEAR
BANGALORE

By Michael Booth

I am about to stop speaking for six days. 'Sleeping demons may come,' warns a staff member, who is to guide me through an intensive programme of yoga and meditation. 'Being left alone with your thoughts for so long can revive unhappy memories or traumas.'

Am I ready to turn my focus within? Will I cope with my demons? And can I sing in the shower? (No. Mouna – the path of silence – is all about conserving the energy wasted through vocalisation. No singing.)

Shreyas, a retreat resort in Karnataka, is rather more luxurious than your average ashram, but the regime is rigorous. There are twice-daily hatha yoga sessions (the first at 7am), followed by group sound meditation (mantra chanting), and walking meditation (strolling around the grounds, pondering the day's philosophical question). Various forms of treatments are on offer, and instructors introduce me to meditative techniques such as *pranayama* (which focuses on breathing), and *trataka* (staring intently at a candle flame). I was an instant convert to Yoga Nidra – known as psychic sleep – which takes you into a 'hypnagogic' state, undulating in and out of consciousness.

By the end, rather than having been driven to the brink of insanity by the silence, I found that I relished the escape from my own voice. Silence truly is golden.

INSIDER TIP: When choosing an ashram, check the accommodation quality, as most are basic.

● Shreyas (00 91 802 773 7102, www.shreyasretreat.com) has a seven-night retreat from £1,442pp, single occupancy, full board, excluding all travel. BA (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com) flies direct to Bangalore from Heathrow from £550. ➤

