



A Life Less Ordinary

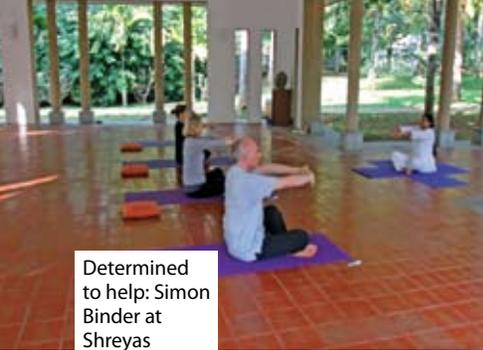
The guests at a Bangalore resort hotel could just have wallowed in luxury. Instead, they decided to help local orphans and build...

A PLACE OF HOPE

BY MIKE PEAKE

Bouncing along a dusty road in the balmy, tropical plains an hour north of Bangalore, Simon and Joanna Binder were in no doubt that they were now entering the real, largely impoverished India. The couple from Wiltshire were being driven from the sanctuary of the Shreyas Yoga Retreat hotel to visit a local orphanage and serve the children food. But it seemed an odd place to take guests who were supposed to be enjoying a rather indulgent and expensive holiday.

“Cheerful and confident”: children in the orphanage in Hesarghatta



Determined to help: Simon Binder at Shreyas

“I really didn’t want to go,” says Simon, a successful 58-year-old London restaurateur. “It seemed like an organised trip to feed the ducks.”

Simon and Joanna, who works in the fashion industry, had had a tough 12 months looking after their sick parents, and Simon’s father Reuben had died shortly before the trip in January 2010. They were hoping for a bit of relaxation and yoga-inspired calm at the luxurious resort, surrounded by ancient banyan trees and farmland.

But other guests persuaded them that the orphanage trip would be worthwhile,

and stepping out of the car and into a sea of smiling faces, Simon saw that instead of misery there was an overwhelming sense of love and happiness. “It was just this incredible place,” he says. “The children were really affectionate and absolutely clean even though there was no running water. The women looking after them in this most horrendous environment were just amazing.”

Simon spent two unforgettable hours in the children’s presence, during which time he helped serve them a meal and listened to them sing. He left determined to help them more, if he could.

In fact, the manager of Shreyas, 45-year-old Balaji Nanabala, and his team had already been supporting the orphanage for some time. As part of the yogic lifestyle, the resort had introduced a popular activity called “community exercise”, where guests picked vegetables from the hotel’s garden, cooked meals and took them by tractor to local schools.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIMON BINDER AND SHREYAS RETREAT

Then, in 2007, two British visitors asked if they could do the same at an orphanage.

Balaji hadn’t heard of any nearby, but the hotel’s naturopath Dr Sukumar Kalavara Nagaraja suggested a little place in the village of Hesaraghatta, some five miles away.

Balaji made some enquiries among the locals to check out the orphanage’s credentials. “There wasn’t a single negative response from anyone,” he says. “Everybody told me that Sarojamma, the lady who runs the place, was loving and kind, like a mother to the children.”

Least surprised about any of this was a grinning Dr Sukumar, 36, who’d been withholding the fact that he, too, had once been in Sarojamma’s care. He knew the vital part she played in the lives of these children, whose parents had died, abandoned them or simply couldn’t afford to look after them. He also knew the orphanage was struggling to pay its bills and to put food on the table. It relied

on small and irregular donations from well-meaning locals and from Sarojamma taking a small cut from the work—assembling electrical and machinery spares—she found for local women.

“I’d never heard of anyone from an orphanage going on to become a doctor,” says Balaji. “When I found out, I was proud to have Dr Sukumar working for us. And I was very curious to meet this incredible lady who’d looked after him.”

At 59, Sarojamma—she only has one name—was slowing down a little by this time. Then again, she’d been looking after those less fortunate than herself for 40 years. When she met Balaji and discovered the hotel wanted to work with her, it felt, she says, “as if the Lord had heard our prayers. We’d been barely making ends meet, but we instantly sensed that they would help and support us.”

Balaji organised twice-weekly visits to cook for the children, and they proved a hit with his guests. “People seemed



Joanna Binder and some of the children at the old orphanage



“Everyone told me that the woman who runs the place was loving and kind”



Sarojamma: “We’d been barely making ends meet”

to feel privileged to play a part,” he says.

According to Sarojamma, the reason for the enthusiasm was the irresistible sight of the little ones who would line up to greet/mob each new arrival. “Every-one who visited us saw cheerful, confident, well-behaved kids, and they seemed affected by the energy here.”

But the orphanage itself was on the verge of falling down. “When Sarojamma showed me the leaky rooms with their uneven stone and cement floors, broken mud walls and lack of toilet facilities, I became quite emotional,” says Balaji. There was also a large hole in the roof.

Government assistance for orphanages is not exactly abundant in India—getting the authorities to recognise one, let alone fund it, is difficult, says Balaji. He dearly wanted to do something to improve the facilities himself.

“Sarojamma had been given some land [by a local friend] and kept asking if we could help with the construction of a new building,” he says. His guests had bought mattresses, clothes, cooking equipment and toys. “But though we loved supporting them, the money needed for rebuilding was beyond our imagination.”

Then Simon Binder knocked on his door. “Was our trip some kind of fundraiser?” Simon asked him straight up.

“No,” said Balaji—any donations had always been spontaneous. But he explained a bit more about Sarojamma’s plight and that he’d

been quietly harbouring plans to help build her brand-new, 4,000-square-foot premises.

“I asked what kind of money he needed to get things started,” says Simon. “In Britain it would be £500,000 or a million. Then he said £20,000 and I thought, *This is madness! That’s got to be affordable!* I said I’d like to help—and also do something in memory of my dad.” He wrote a cheque for £5,000 on the spot and by the end of the week had encouraged another guest to contribute £3,000.

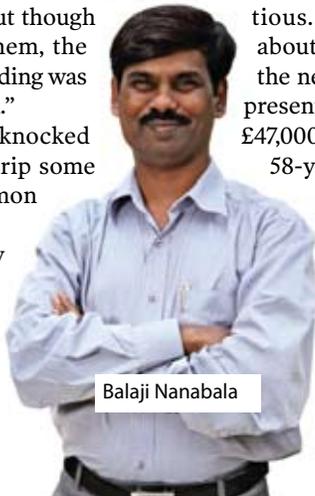
These unexpected acts of generosity opened Balaji’s eyes—others clearly shared his altruism and collectively, perhaps, they could go at least some way to rebuilding the orphanage. He went to see Sarojamma. “I told her we would extend all possible support for the construction, but cautioned her that its completion would depend on the funds that could be generated.”

All Sarojamma heard, of course, was “We’re on!” This was the day she’d been dreaming of.

But Balaji needn’t have been so cautious. Word got round Shreyas about Simon’s gesture and over the next few months 83 past and present guests donated more than £47,000—including £23,000 from a 58-year-old American visitor, Laura Brancato.

“I helped because I was able to do so,” she says. “It was one of the best decisions I have ever made.”

Work on the new orphanage began in earnest, and was completed at



Balaji Nanabala



“The children are proud to belong to the new orphanage”

the end of 2011. What emerged was a sleek modern two-storey building—far beyond original expectations. In the end, it cost £72,000, the remainder of the money being given by generous locals, other friends of the orphanage and Shreyas itself—with many workmen helping out as a favour or for special rates.

The place is now home to 40 children.

It has all the heart of the old orphanage but none of the perils. “It feels safe and secure,” says Sarojamma. “The children are happy, free and proud to belong to a place which is their own little heaven.”

“It’s better than any other residential houses around in its quality and facilities,” beams Balaji. “There are bunk beds, a computer room, a play area and more. The children were so excited when it opened. They were playing hide and seek, climbing up and down the steps, shouting from the terrace, testing the taps and the showers. We have appointed three teachers, all paid a monthly retainer by Shreyas, and our maintenance staff are always on call, free of charge. The orphanage has become a part of our lives and we are always looking for ways to improve it.”

As well as the Shreyas-funded tuition and free yoga sessions for the youngsters,

the hotel has started cultural-awareness courses with them, which climaxed with the orphans performing a number of folk dances at Shreyas last Christmas.

Once or twice a week, a car still rumbles through the Bangalore countryside taking guests to help with meals, to sing and dance with the children and to help with their English. It’s as popular an excursion as ever: one German guest, overcome by a desire to help, recently chose to spend four nights at the orphanage.

A kind, philosophical man, Balaji believes that if everyone directed just ten per cent of their efforts to the community, “there would be no disharmony in society”. And though Simon has only seen the new orphanage in photographs, he’s thoroughly delighted with the outcome of his initial donation.

Sarojamma’s orphans would surely agree: thanks to the hotel and its guests’ generosity, many have gone on to enjoy a successful future. A girl called Girija who made it to university now runs a Montessori school. Venkatesh and Govinda are two brothers who these days manage a fleet of taxis in Bangalore.

“What we have today is hope,” says Sarojamma. “All our apprehensions about the future of the children have been put to rest.” ■