

HOTELSEEKER

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INDIAN RETREAT

Meditations on the sound of silence

Caroline Sylger Jones finds inner peace in the stillness of a Rajasthan hotel that aims to cleanse body and mind

I am sitting up in bed, propped by a cascade of soft white pillows, watching a yellow Indian sun rise over the hilltop outside my window. Mandalas created from fresh marigold petals grace my marble floor, and there are orange marigolds hand-painted on the walls to match. I am sipping "bed tea" – a ginger and black concoction left discreetly outside my room that morning alongside some hand-rolled oat and honey energy balls – and "journaling" my morning thoughts into a Moleskine notebook, a practice that helps you clear your head of thoughts, ready for the day. As my hand moves quickly across the page to let the dull, annoying and joyous things in my life out through ink, I feel a sense of liberation. After about 40 minutes, I pause.

This is my morning ritual each day in suite number 43 at Raas Devigarh, a splendid palace fortress above the large village of Dewara in Rajasthan, created in 1760 and now a hotel with elaborate ramparts to dream on and bowls of fresh marigold and rose petals at every turn. I'm here on a five-night "lia-only" Devi Blessing retreat, devised by British spa brand lia to be bespoke, private and bookable all year round for three, five or nine nights. Named after the Indian goddess

Devi, who is believed to represent all women, the retreats aim to recalibrate your whole system. They include daily two-hour treatments and two daily one-to-one (optional) sessions of yoga and meditation. You can also choose, as I have, to be supported in a period of silence.

Silence has been practised in almost all monastic traditions as a way of slowing down, reconnecting with the self and improving mental and physical health, and an increasing number of retreats in the West are including it as part of their menu. While being in silence can give us a real sense of peace, what's more beneficial is the space it offers to find out what is really going on in our bodies and minds, away from everyday chatter and activity.

It's important that we choose our silence, as the ancient desert hermits would have done, so that we feel in control of it and able to use it to our advantage rather than disappearing into a lonely space. I've experienced retreats in silence before, but they've been Buddhist in flavour and always communal, when you are supported in an organised setting and nourished by the energy of a group. My secular and solitary silence at Raas Devigarh is understandably and notably different. I've pre-ordered my meals, discussed my daily timetable with yoga and meditation teacher Faraz, been encouraged to journal each morning on rising, and then sent gently into silence for three of my five nights. I quite quickly slip into a soothing

I do my yoga on the ramparts, joined by lime-green parakeets



routine of journaling, yoga, breakfast, treatment, down time, meditation, supper and bed. I find that because I am alone, Faraz's intelligent and empathetic presence is vital to the success of my retreat. He reminds me to be "mindful" – to try to be aware of what I'm doing when I'm doing it and in the present moment – and I can talk to him about any practical concerns I might have at any time.

On Buddhist retreats, you are required not to read, draw or write, but I find that my reading, sketching and journaling here are a much-needed solace and form of mindfulness. Being able to indulge in them becomes part of the pleasure of being silent at a hotel rather than on an organised retreat. I am, however, entirely happy – one might say infinitely joyous – to switch off my iPhone and computer.

After journaling each day I choose to do my own yoga practice on the palace's wonderful top ramparts, with romantic views of the colourful village and countryside beyond. I'm often joined by a band of lime-green parakeets, who perch on the railings and joyously screech each time I move into a pose as if to say, "Hey guys! Just take a look at this one over here!" Guests new to yoga can instead have a private session with Faraz.

Next is a breakfast of a "pure alkaline" juice such as celery, cucumber and ginger, alongside a turmeric latte (very yummy), a huge pot of green tea, and eggs if I'm hungry, served courteously on the



NATURAL HAVEN Caroline, left, enjoys the idyllic surroundings

supper at a table for one on the terrace. Like the activities, meals here can be as indulgent or as cleansing as you choose.

While I eat mainly off the wellness menu with dishes such as lemon coriander vegetable soup, chargrilled zucchini and broccoli with garlic-infused spiced tomato salsa, I also enjoy one glass of fantastic red wine each night and on the last evening I treat myself to a sensational chocolate fondant pudding. Why not? No one's telling.

I barely register the presence of other guests and don't feel lonely or unusual when I dine or sit by the pool alone. This wouldn't be the case at every hotel, but Raas Devigarh feels discreet enough, with enough solo guests, for it not to be an issue.

There's a giant, hand-painted swing in one of the courtyards, and most nights after supper I take myself there to swing like a child under the stars with no one about, the heady scent of queen of the night flowers in my nose. I have a rose petal bath in my room one evening, and I often return from supper to find poems (such as "Music



and Silence" by Rumi) or pieces of prose (such as "What is a Goddess?") to reflect on before bed.

Very quickly, in such a rarefied atmosphere, my tension unravels, and free of the chit-chat that goes with daily communication, ideas about my life pop up for me to examine. I have nothing especially to "sort" – my body and mind need to rest and rebound for the same reasons of "busyness" that most of us have.

Being quiet undoubtedly quickens the pace of this process, though my surroundings are not wholly quiet. I'm in India, after all, and though the hotel and grounds are tranquil, sounds often call to me in the distance – dogs barking, birds singing, cockerels crowing, villagers talking, men drumming, women singing while they thud their washing on bare rocks.

I'm not totally silent myself either, as I would be in a closed retreat, for this is a hotel, and while I avoid company, if a fellow guest says hello to me or a member of staff asks me a question, I naturally respond. As Faraz points out, I'm aiming to create a silence within, rather than a silence without – a sustainable stillness of thought and focus which, if found, is not going to be disturbed by saying hello to a guest or thanking a waiter.

Do I find that stillness within? After I come out of silence, on the last day, I take a guided walk through the lively village, visit a local women's cooperative and buy an Indian-British designed kaftan in the hotel's new shop. Marigolds and roses, I feel rested and reassured, content to have been quiet and now also content to be speaking freely and busy again. This is not the transformative silence I've experienced on Buddhist communal retreats. But I would happily experience it again if I'm stressed, and for longer next time.

Five nights' full board at Raas Devigarh, with daily yoga and lia treatments, meditation, sound therapy, village walk and temple tour, from £2,800pp through Greaves India (020 7487 911); greavesindia.co.uk, including international and domestic flights.

SILENT STAYS: THREE OF THE BEST

SHARPHAM HOUSE, DEVON

You can choose secular mindfulness retreats in a gorgeous Palladian-style mansion, nature meditation retreats under canvas in the woodland or Buddhist retreats at The Barn at this inspirational 550-acre estate alongside a three-mile stretch of the river Dart near Totnes in Devon. Chunks of time, including some



meals, are spent in silence on most retreats to deepen mindful awareness, and all retreats move into silence after 9pm. **Three nights' full board from £325 (single room): 01803 732542; sharphamtrust.org**

YOBADA LOUNGE, FRANCE

From 8.30pm until noon the following day is always a period of "noble silence", where speaking is not permitted unless it is completely essential. The silences are a key feature of

power of mindful breath and use yogic movement to rejuvenate body and mind.

All-inclusive four-night retreat from £575pp, based on two sharing a double room: 0033 647 23 49 66; yobabalounge.com



SUAN MOKKHU, THAILAND

For Vipassana meditation in the forest, Suam Mokkh Buddhist monastery at Chaitsa, north of Surat Thani, runs popular, highly affordable and deeply effective 10-day silent meditation in retreat every month at its International Dharma

Hermitage, on the last day of each month. You can't book in advance – you need to turn up on the morning of the day before to register. Be prepared to get up at 4am, wash and eat communally and help out with chores during the day. Guidance and talks from the monks and nuns are inspirational. **Ten days from 2,000 baht (£25), which you pay in advance and is non-refundable: 0066 2 936 2800; suanmokkh.org**