

ASIA SPECIAL REPORT

A massage to India

In search of local customs and a little midday peace, Sue White winds up relaxed, oiled and tattooed.

Wedged between New and Old Delhi, busy Pahar Ganj bazaar seems an unlikely place to participate in some of India's most calming rituals. The smell of cow dung littering the alleyways mixes with the more pleasing aromas from the area's tourist restaurants. The honking of horns is relentless and the heat is - well, to call it oppressive would be generous.

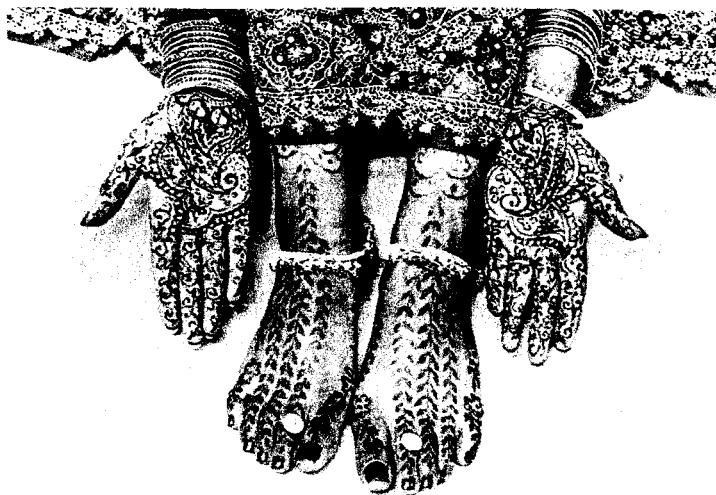
I wander the backstreets of the bazaar, determined to escape the continual cries of "Madam, which country?" and find a way to engage with more agreeable local customs. I find myself outside Body & Soul, a small Ayurvedic clinic. Ayurveda is an ancient Indian medicine system; its practitioners work holistically with herbs, detox treatments and, most enticingly for those looking for calm in the chaos, massage.

It's the absurd promotional flyer that convinces me to go inside: "Tailor-made treatments for the time-crunched tourist and business traveller. To be prodded and rubbed and kneaded and generally treated like a human pie-crust child."

Over a hot chai, Dr Jaggi and I discuss the options available for my first human pie-crust experience. Shirodhara, the first step in the Ayurvedic detox program, sounds tempting. Two litres of specially blended oils will be slowly poured onto my temple to help remove any mental stress before the scalp is massaged. When I learn that the basic massage (Abhyanga) involves two masseuses kneading each time-crunched tourist, my decision is made.

I follow the practitioners up marble stairs to the massage room and am relieved to discover an intricately patterned, coffin-shaped shell has nothing to do with my massage - it's a steam bath. I'm offered an enormous pair of cotton briefs, which I slide on over my own underwear.

Ayurvedic massage uses copious amounts of oil; friends have warned me any clothing worn



Indian ink ... the art of henna.

will likely be drenched. I settle on a bench covered with a plastic sheet and relax. Warm, pungent oils are poured onto my back while long sweeping movements at just the right pressure lull me into a trance-like state and I'm allowed to drift off. This is no five-star resort but the experience is definitely authentic. Dr Jaggi has been practising since 1986 and all techniques follow Ayurveda's strict guidelines.

Later I go looking for an oil-free Indian experience. Henna wallahs (street vendors) stencil intricate designs onto arms, legs and feet. Known as

mehendi, henna designs are traditionally commissioned before wedding ceremonies by both the bride and groom. They are also worn as a fashion statement by Indian women at any time. Like the afterglow of a good holiday, henna tattoos are temporary. Typically lasting from five days to two weeks, mehendi offer visitors the tattoo they never dared to have.

Enticed by any technique that allows me to rest in the heat, I sit down with an elderly man who has worked with henna for 15 years. My first design is expertly squeezed out of its small tube in a process not unlike icing a cake. Deftly, he fashions the paste into a delicate pattern of circles and flowers that travel gracefully along my forearm. As we wait for the paste to dry he explains I need to keep my design protected only for another three hours before I can wash it and reveal its full glory.

Pre-wedding mehendi designs on the palms, arms and legs signal impending nuptials to the world but, as I'm told by a scholar from Lucknow who compliments my design as we wait on a packed train platform, henna has antiseptic properties, too. "If we are to be married, you may not know my hygiene and I may not know your hygiene, so the antiseptic properties are very helpful."

There are downsides to this unique souvenir. One design, which looked fantastic for the fortnight it stayed on my forearm, leaves a trail of dyed hairs behind. Months later, my formerly blonde arm hairs remain a vivid black as they grow out at a painstakingly slow rate.

While henna and massage are experiences for the body, ashrams aim to help the mind. India's spiritual centres are an important aspect of Hindu culture, as European tourists visit churches, Indian tourists visit ashrams. It's common for holidaying Indian families to stop in for a meal or offer their evening prayers, but foreign visitors are just as welcome. In Rishikesh, in the foothills of the Himalayas, dozens of ashrams welcome visitors for a meal, a yoga class or to stay for a night, a week or a month. (The Beatles are the most famous visitors to Rishikesh.)

I choose an "easy" ashram. Phool Chatti was

My first design is squeezed out of its small tube in a process like icing a cake.

once a stopover for pilgrims walking the arduous trail to Himalayan sites. Today, families still drop by as they make the same journey by car, but the ashram is most popular with travellers for its week-long retreats providing yoga, meditation and an introduction to ashram life.

The mood is positive among the 20 or so visitors participating in my ashram experience as we gather on the banks of the Ganges River. Many have never done yoga before, which is surprising given our schedule includes three hours of yoga, an hour of meditation and a variety of other yogic practices that begin at six in the morning.

In stricter environs (many ashrams are famous for their tough discipline) this may be problematic, but at Phool Chatti the attitude is more relaxed. Students are encouraged to participate in the full ashram schedule, but there are no recriminations if you sleep through the morning bell.

After a week of vegetarian meals taken seated on the floor of the dining hall, daily sinus-cleansing practices and lots of special yogic breathing practice, the newcomers seem satisfied but eager to move on. Now I'm accustomed to the early morning starts I could easily stay longer. Except for the fact my henna tattoo has faded and I'm ready for another massage.

FAST FACTS

Massage Expect a lack of privacy with Ayurvedic massage; masseuses often watch their client get undressed. The conclusion is often unceremonious - a light back slap accompanied by the word "finish" is common. Body & Soul is in Delhi's Pahar Ganj bazaar, near Hotel Namaskar. Ask them for a flyer with a map. A one-hour Abhyanga massage is 500 rupees (\$14).

Henna Many henna wallahs work in Pahar Ganj. They will happily use any sketch you provide but allowing them to create a design delivers the best results. Simple designs cost about 100 rupees.

Yoga Rishikesh, four hours north of Delhi by train, is the world capital of yoga. For the full ashram experience try Phool Chatti Ashram. See www.phoolchattiyoga.com.

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