

India

Heat, holy men and chanting at dawn: are you tough enough for an ashram?

Fashion designers and authors flock to this legendary Indian retreat.

Caroline Phillips puts it to the test

We pull up at the ashram. A bare-chested man in a dhoti walks past as monkeys and peacocks wander around. "I've been here before," I say, startled. "In another

life," replies a distant cousin, Alan Lawrence. No, two years ago, en route to Kerala. I visited for nanoseconds and thought: "Golly, how could anyone stay here? So boring and uncomfortable." Now I'm here for two weeks.

I want a happiness holiday, so I've opted for a spiritual trip to India. Welcome to the Sri Ramana ashram in Tiruvannamalai in southern India. It's in an unremarkable market town near the sacred mountain of Arunachala, a place of pilgrimage. But it's a place that lures holy men, British fashion designers and bestselling authors. It even boasts an "ashram season" — a sort of spiritual Ascot from November to December — when 110,000 enlightenment seekers arrive. So will I find my soul here?

As we get out of the car, my 81 year-old companion, who stays here every winter, muses about life-changing experiences. I, meanwhile, worry whether my luggage, containing an inflatable mattress and

goose-feather pillow, will see me through this hardcore experience.

Alan has persuaded me to stay with him in the ashram. He is a former Mayfair gallery owner who is now a mystical author and Ramana devotee. He has endured bankruptcy, depression and the death of his beloved wife. Yet now he displays more contentment than a national Happiness Index. Whatever he's got, I'd like some of it.

Ramana was one of the 20th century's leading sages. He believed that the best teaching was in silence and that our identification with the mind, body and ego veils our true nature. So the aim is to surrender your problems, quieten your ego and inquire within.

The guru — who died in 1950 — has followers aplenty finding their inner gurus on Facebook. Eckhart Tolle, the author of *The Power of Now*, is a Ramana fan; even Somerset Maugham visited the ashram.

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Indeed, Maugham modelled the fictional guru of his masterpiece, *The Razor's Edge*, on Ramana.

It's time to get stuck in. A serene devotee shows me my "cell". It is clean, has a single bed that could double as a table and a plastic water jug to use for showering. Accommodation is by donation, so I can't complain that my sleep is interrupted by the song of India: dogs yelping and people shouting. The ashram itself is peaceful and has buildings dating from the 1930s, an apothecary for free medicine, a library and a priests' school. There is also a huge marble-floored meditation room in which devotees sit with legs crossed or perambulate in intense worship.

Ramana's presence permeates the ashram. We sit under his watchful eyes at lunch when the dining room becomes an orphanage for lost souls. Rows of us cross-legged on the floor eating vegetarian curry off banana-leaf plates. I sit between a



sadhu with devotional ash markings on his face and Anna Du Chesne, 40, an Australian convert. Anna, a librarian, was run over outside the ashram in February 2010, nearly died and had her lower leg amputated. "I learnt to surrender and accept whatever comes," she says with serenity. Afterwards, we meet Sarah King, 44, an erstwhile fashion designer. She seems an unlikely devotee — British boarding school, Air Force father — but lived in the ashram from 2000 until 2009. "It stopped me thinking. It's a refuge from the madness of the world."

As for me, I had hoped to spend my days learning meditation, honing my yoga techniques and boning up on methods of self-inquiry. But Ramana believed that schedules distract people from finding their inner gurus, so the days are unstructured.

There's a milk-offering ceremony at 6.45am, then breakfast and chanting of the vedas — said to quieten the mind. This is followed by worship, the feeding of the poor and, at 11.30am, our lunch. Afterwards there are readings of Ramana's works in English and Tamil. Then at 6.15pm about 200 people congregate to chant. But there's a lot of free time.

I befriend the author of *Effortless Meditation*, Swami Madhurananda. He meditates for 12 hours a day and doesn't stop smiling. "Hope is the poison that disturbs our peace. You don't need hope to be happy. You're already happy." I sit on his floor trying to reach the happiness that

other therapies fail to reach. After three days the positive aspects of ashram life start to touch me. The days take on a pleasing rhythm and my mind starts to quieten. I enjoy rising at dawn as women in saris sprinkle religious symbols of ash on their doorsteps; then drinking chai and chatting in the nearby café, joined often by cows and holy men. I climb with devotees up the mountain to the cave in which Ramana once lived. I loll under a mango tree, reading spiritual books, enjoying the intellectuals, mystics and alternative types that the ashram attracts and soak in the atmosphere of profound worship.

But I decide to leave a week early. Ashram life is too tough for a spoilt five-star-hotel girl like me. I find the heat, dust and physical discomfort difficult. Used to endless activity and juggling work and family, I struggle with the lack of structure. I don't have a blinding moment of enlightenment. I don't even find my divine spark or inner guru. But, hey, they weren't offering express enlightenment.

When Ramana died, a comet trailed slowly across the sky, witnessed by many. My spiritual progress is harder to measure. It's more a flickering torch than a blazing comet. But I leave feeling more peaceful, aware of a teaching that leads to a life of purity and grace.

They say that Ramana's philosophy hooks you in like a tiger's claw. Funnily enough, I can already feel the place luring me back. But this time I'll pack an air-conditioning unit and earplugs.

A sadhu in Sri Ramana Ashram, Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu

Need to know

British Airways (ba.com, 08444 930787) flies from Heathrow to Madras, India, from £556 in November. It takes four hours in a taxi (costing approximately £40) to get from Madras to Tiruvannamalai.

Accommodation in Sri Ramana Ashram in Tiruvannamalai (0095 4175 22491, tiruvannamalai.nic.in/mainramana.html) is paid for by donation; all meals are provided.