

# Himalayan Haven

**RACHAEL OKES-ASH** DISCOVERS WHAT MAKES THE ANANDA SPA IN INDIA A WORLD-CLASS DESTINATION SPA FOR HOLLYWOOD CELEBRITIES AND BOLLYWOOD BEAUTIES.



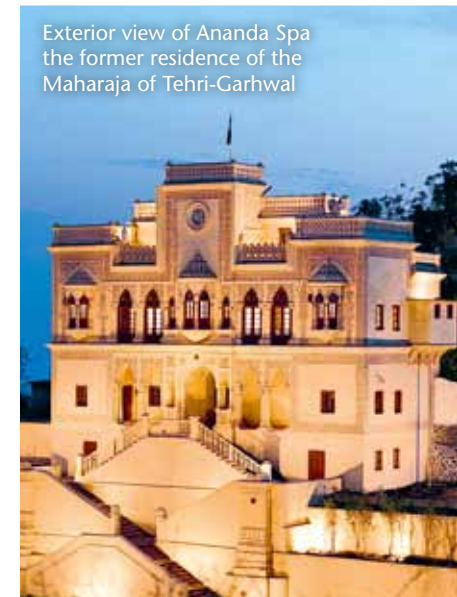
The impressive Boardroom with a majestic 15 feet high ceiling



The Viceregal Suite



The living room of the Viceregal Suite



Exterior view of Ananda Spa the former residence of the Maharaja of Tehri-Garhwal

Ananda Spa's palatial building rises from the green foothills of the Himalayas not far from the holy town of Rishikesh. An oasis of calm, it overlooks a town of typical Indian madness. Ananda Spa is set in a Maharajah Palace and it is hard not to think of a bygone era when I pass through the guarded wrought-iron gates that lead onto the manicured lawn.

This is my first time to Ananda and I am following in the footsteps of regular guests Uma Thurman, Heidi and Seal, Ricky Martin and a host of Bollywood's elite who regularly descend upon this shrine to Indian design in search of solace, rejuvenation and restoration. Greeted at the palace reception I am blessed with burning herbs and a melodic chant from the front office staff to cleanse me from my journey.

The palace is steeped in history with a ballroom, tower and various nooks and crannies that just spell meditation but it's the 20,000-foot spa that specialises in Ayurvedic treatments I've really come to see.

Guests at Ananda are given freshly laundered white Kurta pyjama garments twice a day. The fine cotton pants with overlaid tunic are

a novelty at first that conjure up thoughts of a high-end psychiatric hospital. Looking over the yoga amphitheatre I note how others have personalised their own wearing of the kurtas – some wrap themselves with colourful pashminas made in the nearby hills, others wear meditation beads and leather sequined slippers. One man wears a waistcoat and another wraps a scarf around his neck. The simple stress of deciding what to wear each day has instantly been removed and Kurta comfort is paramount when focusing on relaxation.

Ayurvedic doctors take guests through wellness consultations to determine the style of retreat ahead of them. Not everyone chooses the Ayurvedic path, as some prefer to indulge in a western style detox with European treatments. I am happy to go with the Ayurvedic flow and am told to "eat to my type" from the restaurant a la carte menu which is divided into Vata, Pitta and Kapha and sounds more like an American college fraternity than a diet. The good news is in the Ayurvedic world bread is my friend. True to five-star-destination-spa form there are staff ready, willing and able to fulfil my every desire,

need or request but all I want is a hot ginger tea with honey as a wake up call each morning. It arrives in a warmed pot delivered by a beaming gentleman whose joy clearly comes from giving.

I must rise early as I have signed up for various Himalayan-style trekking adventures during the day but if I had chosen to wile away my time meditating in the ballroom, being pummelled in the spa treatment room or submerging myself in the hot plunge pools I could have. Instead I tramp through the surrounding hills with a private guide and enter a world of secret mountain villages, hidden valley farms and mountain top temples where I make offerings from the picnic hampers from Ananda.

The highlight of the week is the Ganga Aarati, a joyous religious celebration on the banks of the Ganges in downtown Rishikesh and held nightly at dusk as candles are lit to the sounds of musical chanting. The ceremony moves me to tears as I sip masala chai from a nearby tea house and clap along with the brightly adorned children around me. Perhaps some of the reason for my tears is that my stay is coming to an end and I don't want to leave.



## Details

Ananda Spa is a member of Preferred Hotels and Resorts [www.preferredhotels.com](http://www.preferredhotels.com)  
 Thai Airways flies from Sydney to New Delhi via Bangkok with 170 degree recline beds in Business Class. [www.thaiairways.com](http://www.thaiairways.com)  
 Kingfisher Airlines fly from New Delhi to Dehradun which is an hour's picturesque drive from Ananda. [www.flykingfisher.com](http://www.flykingfisher.com)