

72

HOSHIARPUR

THE Retreat

**Pranic
Healing**

*Cleanse your aura,
unclog your chakras*

Meditation

*Quieten the little voice
inside you*

**Farming
Pursuits**

*Go kinnow picking or
planting seeds*



*Yoga, meditation and divine healing in a
blessed corner of Punjab. Maybe this is
what the world needs right now.*

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AMIT DIXIT

↑ Yup,
laughter is
the best
medicine

The

ALARM BEEPS AT 5AM.

The Punjab winter is punishing. The shower, thankfully, is warm. At 5.45am, we emerge from our cottages, and walk under a still-dark sky studded with stars to the meditation room. It's unlit, cosy, like some primal womb. Blankets have been provided and we warm up with some breathwork before settling down for *yog nidra*—a conscious, guided relaxation of the body where the mind remains alert and aware throughout—followed by a round of meditation. By the time we finish, the sun has risen. The soul is nourished. Now the body must be attended to. So, there's yoga, followed by a piping hot breakfast (oh, those veg cutlets). After a break, there's a round of pranic healing.

In the evening, almost the same routine is repeated.

It's really as simple as that. Or is it?

Inside the mind are a million mad thoughts. Voices that refuse to shut up. Visions more persistent than your Instagram feed. Meditation? Easy yet difficult. Luckily, there's help at hand.

Location,

LOCATION, LOCATION

I was in Hoshiarpur—a scenic, rural corner of Punjab within kissing distance of the Bhakra Nangal Dam in Himachal Pradesh—at Citrus County Firdaus, a chic homestay noted for its large-hearted Punjabi hospitality (the good effects of which you then work off by cycling, etc in the nearby forests and ravines). Every few weekends,

✱ **Set at the foot of the Shivaliks, Hoshiarpur is the citrus bowl of Punjab**

the farmstay transforms into the site for a yoga and meditation retreat conducted by Divine Soul Yoga, an entity backed by the corporate might of the Hoshiarpur-based Sonalika Group.

There's a flurry of activity as the young—and very enthusiastic—facilitators put the show together and ensure it

runs seamlessly for three nights. The participants are chosen through word of mouth and social media and mostly hail from Hoshiarpur itself or nearby cities. They are a diverse lot, from powerful industrialists to common folks like me. One retreat was conducted exclusively for cancer patients. Everyone is hosted at the retreat at no charge at all.

As I just said, and cannot say enough, this is a beautiful part of the Punjab, with hills looming in the distance—there's a nip in the air in the evenings even in June—and a tranquillity that is hard to come by. In winter, of course, the cold is bracing but, if you're dressed warmly, you'll be able to appreciate the frost settling on the leaves, the clear blue of the sky peppered with wispy clouds, and sunlight quivering through the trees.

Pranic healing is a 'no-touch' healing system based on the idea that the body has the innate ability to heal itself. Developed by Grandmaster Choa Kok Sui, pranic healing utilises 'life force' or *prana* to accelerate the body's ability to heal itself.

There's something magical about Citrus County Firdaus, nestled within stands of kinnow and poplar trees, that belies description. I hope I have succeeded in conveying a sense of what it is like. In spiritual terms, you might say it throbs with a different energy. In any case, there is no doubt that it offers utter peace and quiet and, quite possibly, that is why it was chosen as a setting for these contemplative pursuits. And that brings us to the unlikely origins of this retreat.

The

BEGINNING

The creator of the Divine Soul Yoga programme is Dr Deepak Mittal, Managing Director of the Sonalika Group and one of India's wealthiest people. A self-made industrialist and entrepreneur, Mittal began on a small scale, but, over the course of three decades, diversified and grew Sonalika Tractors into a global leader in tractor manufacturing.

At the age of 40, Mittal was faced with



➤ A tranquil yoga session

▼ A young participant at the retreat



↙ The secret of good mood is good food

At the core of the programme is meditation. Different stages of the journey call for different kinds. Mittal has devised a method which, if followed in letter and spirit, should make it a breeze

an existential dilemma. What do you do when you have achieved everything in life—at least all the usual material things one aspires to? What next? Two decades and many spiritual adventures later, Mittal is a changed man, with a twinkle in his eye and an easy laugh. If you met him on the street, you would never guess he's a tycoon. Now, he devotes his energies to popularising yoga, meditation and pranic healing in India and around the world. In fact, before the pandemic brought the world to a standstill, he used to be based in Amsterdam for half the year (the other half, mostly in Delhi), where he has been assiduously promoting yoga and meditation, and where he has a huge and devoted following.

At some point in his decades-long spiritual journey—which included interactions with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar of Art of Living as well as the Brahma Kumaris—Mittal experienced a 'divine connect' with the 'Supreme Being'. You can describe it in many ways, perhaps all inadequate if you've not experienced it yourself: enlightenment, epiphany, ecstasy, seeing the light. But you get the idea. This is what all meditators eventually aspire to.

Mittal does not claim to be a guru, only a facilitator on your own spiritual path, there to gently nudge you along. Like many of us, the lockdown gave him pause for thought. He shifted base back to Hoshiarpur and, a few months later, launched these retreats.

Treat

OF A RETREAT

Naturally, Mittal is at the heart of the Divine Soul Yoga programme. He conducts the meditation sessions himself and gives leisurely talks in the evenings which are so riveting that everyone loses track of time (and there are no dinner gongs here). Mittal

According to certain ancient belief systems, the body has seven primary chakras or energy vortexes. When the chakras are clogged, energy doesn't flow properly in the body, leading to physical, mental and emotional imbalances, and a range of health issues.



↑ Flock of geese at Sonalika Meditation Valley

↓ Mittal planting seeds



↓ Kinnow ready to harvest

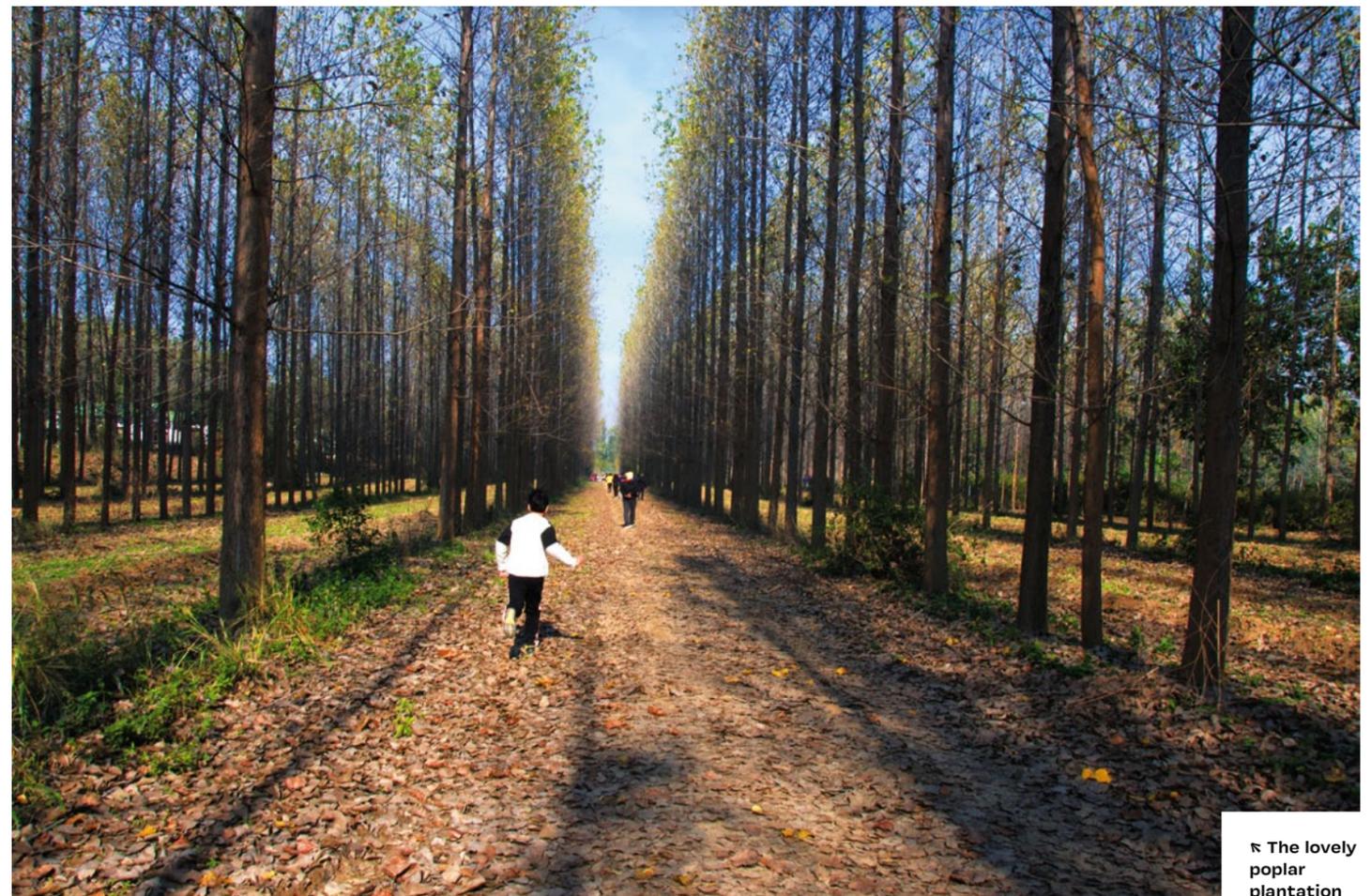


also generally hangs around, available for a private word or to answer any queries you may have. This sort of access is privileged, and it makes the retreat special.

Nothing is achieved without teamwork. Mittal's team pours their heart and soul into making the retreat a success. Everything runs like clockwork. There are people to hustle you out of bed should the cold make you reluctant. There are constant reminders to tuck your mobile phone away—which could well be half the healing process. The yoga instructors are extremely particular that you get the form of the exercise or pose right—and always

with a smile on your face, mind you, not writhing in agony. Above all, there is an air of camaraderie, catalysing new friendships among the participants—we're all Soul Yogis now, after all—and facilitating an energising exchange of ideas and spiritual notes.

One of the highlights of the retreat is the pranic healing session, a no-touch therapy that unclogs your chakras and clears your aura. It looks like nothing much, just someone swiping and 'cutting' the air in front of you, but if you keep an open mind the effects can be transformative. Believe it or not, it can also be administered long distance over the telephone. Another



↖ The lovely poplar plantation

After three nights, I felt transformed. I was more focussed, more self-aware. I found myself more in the present moment, instead of hurtling towards a future that never comes or regretting a past lost in the folds of time

highlight of the programme is laughter yoga. It wasn't easy for someone as grumpy as me to loosen up, but I eventually did much to my astonishment. I recommend it highly. The world needs a lot of laughter right now, even if we have to induce it.

But at the core of the programme is meditation. Different stages of the journey call for different kinds. Mittal has devised a method which, if followed in letter and spirit, should make it a breeze. Goals like

stress busting, controlling your thoughts, cultivating blankness, seeking peace and even doing it for health reasons fall by the side, the meditation eventually evolving to a contemplation of the universe itself. I won't say it's easy, but if you keep at it, you will reap the rewards. Just trust the process and get with it.

Yoga

FOR THE SOUL

I can say without exaggeration that, after three nights, I felt transformed. I was suddenly more focussed, more self-aware. I found myself more in the present moment, instead of hurtling towards a future that never comes or regretting a past that is lost in the folds of time. I found I was letting my guard down more often. It was a heady new feeling, one that I found myself embracing readily. Even days after returning, I felt charged and there was a spring in my step.

To sustain the transformation, however, requires regular practice at home—for which some handy audios recorded in Mittal's soothing and persuasive voice are provided—and periodic refresher sessions (there's something amazing about meditating in a room full of people who are doing the same thing—I guess, we are essentially herd animals). Soul yogis who live in Hoshiarpur or nearby cities are able to go for a round of meditation every Sunday, followed, of course, by a delectable and healthy breakfast. Lucky folks! For me, it's an eight-hour drive so I haven't managed to return yet.

So what next? Once Covid is well and truly behind us and things normalise, Mittal's dream is to have Divine Soul Yoga centres in every country in the world. A range of top-notch skincare products is also being launched. This could well be the beginning of a whole new wellness and spirituality movement. Just remember who told you about it first. 🙏