

California *dreamin'*

Kate Delamere travels to the USA to experience holistic healing in the hands of the Chopra Center. With Deepak himself in residence, will she learn to dump her emotional baggage?



I sat in the back of a convertible saloon, grappling with Deepak Chopra's pearls of spiritual wisdom as I head to his Californian retreat for a holistic overhaul. "To live in joy, allow experience to flow through you with loving awareness without clinging or aversion," tweets the enlightened one to his followers.

"But how?" I cry in frustration as we enter the curving drive of the Chopra Center For Wellbeing in Carlsbad, clinging to my bag full of worries gathered along life's highway.

Chopra founded the coastal centre in 1996, along with the late neurologist David Simon. It offers mind, body and spirit makeovers, including physical and emotional healing.

So here I am, with all my dysfunction - memories repressed, sat on and shoved down so far that I don't recognise their emotional triggers. I bang the car door,



Deepak Chopra, founder of the wellbeing centre

karma rebounding, and drag my suitcase into reception on my search for emotional release.

The centre is based at La Costa Resort and Spa, 30 miles north of San Diego and 90 minutes' drive south of Los Angeles. It's housed in a collection of buildings with whitewashed walls, flowing fountains and pristine borders bursting with brightly coloured flowers.

A bellboy with a Hollywood smile escorts me through the gardens, past a spa pool, tennis courts and a golf course, and on to my luxurious room. It has an enormous bed and a balcony where I can contemplate my navel - that's if it doesn't drop off during my holistic repair job.

After a night sleeping off the jet lag, I present myself at the centre the next morning. Manager Marcia Hayes oversees the running of this peaceful haven, decorated with vases of tulips, orchids and daisies, the perfume of lit rosemary and ylang-ylang candles rich in the air. There are pictures of Buddha and the Hindu god Krishna, and shelves of spiritual reading, including some of Chopra's 65 books, 19 of which made the *New York Times* Best-Sellers list.

Marcia tells me hundreds of people from around the world come here each year to connect with their deepest spiritual selves. Treatments are individually tailored and usually combine a health diagnosis from a medical consultant, a detox, daily meditation, yoga and ancient Indian Ayurvedic treatments. Ayurveda aims to balance three doshas, or elemental energies in the body - Vata (air and space); Pitta (fire and water); and Kapha (water and earth). Each person has



The spa's courtyard encourages relaxation

a combination of doshas that define their temperament and physical characteristics.

Marcia fixes me with an appraising eye and sums me up from the verbal CV I give her of my life, exercise patterns, body language and body type.

"You're a mix of Pitta, the type that can be driven, and Vata, who have busy minds and a fragile constitution," she proclaims.

It turns out Pittas also have oily skin, fair hair and penetrating eyes, can be passionate, like directed exercise and have vivid dreams.

Vatas on the other hand have protruding teeth - maybe before the teenage brace - bitten nails, are often constipated, talk rapidly, have a variable libido, like travel, art and philosophy, are imaginative, can be nervous or shy and have short memories. That's most of my traits covered, then.

And the prescription? My fast mind needs to be slowed, my body needs to be exercised and I'm in need of a thorough emotional cleansing. So I'm booked in for a three-day

It feels like I've been reacquainted with my physical self, an old friend I lost touch with

combined massage, yoga and meditation treatment, starting with a 65-minute Ayurvedic Odyssey Enlivening Therapy massage to balance my body's systems.

That afternoon sees me wrapped in a towel in a treatment room with therapist Merwan, 27, an Ayurvedic specialist and healing arts master, who studied at a Californian massage school.

"We hold memories in our tissue, called cellular memory," he says. "The physical pain we experience in our bodies is sometimes due to emotional attachments we may not have dealt with and let go."

Merwan explained that he'd massage my cells and tissues to release tension and free up locked memories. "Some people respond by crying hysterically, others see dead loved ones, and others have out-of-body experiences," he warns me.

The thought that I may be reduced to a sobbing blob and talk to dead relatives,

or leave my body when he touches me, makes my shoulders hunch with resistant tension.

But Merwan is taking no prisoners. As I lie face down on the bed, he deftly gives me a dry glove massage known as *garshana* to prepare my skin, then covers my body in warm, sweet-smelling essential patchouli oil - a natural restorer of balance - using long deep strokes to move the oil deep into the tissues to loosen stored toxicity.

The invigorating scent and kneading catapult me into the moment. Merwan's hands move up and down each leg, foot and arm. When he reaches my hands, I'm surprised to feel an overwhelming sense of sadness. I wonder briefly at the emotion that's stored there and why.

He massages my back in deep, slow circles, and whenever he digs under my right shoulder I feel the urge to let out a belly laugh.

As his fingers push up through my hair and over my scalp, I get a rush of amazing images in my head. A road. A bridge. The ocean, bathed in vibrant greens and yellows. My body hasn't taken off, but my mind has.

It feels like I've been reacquainted with my physical self, an old friend I lost touch with. As I get dressed, I make a silent pact to listen to my body more. The odd ache



The atmosphere is relaxed and peaceful



A sunrise yoga session will help to kick-start your day



Kate and Davidji get deep

or random emotion is a reminder to let go of past experiences.

Next morning, I'm up at 7am for yoga. My body feels lighter as I go through the moves of the sun salutation. Later that day, I'm booked in for an introductory guided meditation with Davidji, Dean of Chopra Center University and teacher of Primordial Sound Meditation, a technique that uses sounds or mantras to lead your mind into silence.

He looks like someone who's spent too many years in the mud at Glastonbury, with his grey ponytail and assortment of leather necklaces and cotton wristbands. But there's something special about his blend of ballsy New York humour and gentle spirituality.

Davidji's spiritual conversion came after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

I worked on Wall Street for 12 years on the 88th floor of the World Trade Center, earning millions of dollars a year. I was an aggressive trader and ate my competition for breakfast. Six months before the terrorist attacks I was offered a new job and moved out of the building. Everyone I worked with died.

"Six months after 9/11, I was walking in SoHo past a row of cardboard boxes the homeless were living in when someone reached out, grabbed my leg and yelled, "What's going to be on your tombstone?" The question stopped me in my tracks. I was



Kate gets up close and personal with Deepak

43 and married with no kids. I knew life wasn't about money, and wanted to find out, so I quit my job, left my wife and headed to a Deepak Chopra meditation retreat in Oxford, England. Then I went to India to search for a guru, until I realised all the time he was inside me.'

Davidji attended a meditation workshop at the centre in 2003, and now teaches meditation to a range of people, from top athletes and entrepreneurs to celebrities such as Dave Stewart from pop duo Eurythmics, or the staff of multinational companies like investment bank Goldman Sachs.

We sit cross-legged on cushions around a grey lingam stone, a phallic symbol of the Hindu god Shiva. Davidji encourages me to close my eyes and focus on the journey of my breathing, into my body, down to my stomach, then curling up again on an eternal loop. I find my mind looping away, too, as unrelated thoughts pop into my head. Amy Winehouse... Hockney's paintings of LA swimming pools... my daughter's surprise day out with her godmother... then nothing. There's a glimpse of stillness, then I feel a sharp stinging sensation from the sunburn on my right leg and open my eyes. Davidji is looking at me with expectation. I'm surprised to learn I've zoned out for 25 minutes.

I feel clear-headed when I get up, and the background chatter in my head has stopped.

'You're present,' Davidji grins. 'That's what it's all about.'

Next morning I meet the guru himself. Deepak Chopra, 65, who leads courses at the centre, is launching *Leela*, the chakra-based interactive game. He's smaller than I thought, grey-haired, wearing a creased green shirt and black suit, hands deep in his pockets, a frown on his face. He seems almost unassuming, until you see what look like diamonds glittering along the arms of his glasses.

In an interview with Deepak, he speaks about his unique physical, mental, emotional and spiritual approach to healing. 'Once you've



La Jolla Cove in San Diego is a popular spot for walkers



The reflexology path at the Center is well-trodden

quietened the mind, you can start to perceive your inner world,' he says. 'Close your eyes, put your attention in your heart and ask, "Who am I? What do I want?" Then go about your business and you'll see things start to change.'

When I leave later that day, I continue my spiritual journey. The retreat is perfect for combining with a touring holiday, and I drive down the Pacific Coast Highway to San Diego, California's southernmost city, surrounded by mountains and deserts.

Comic-Con, the annual comic book convention, is taking place when I'm there. People dressed as superheroes mill around in the streets. I stare as Batman walks past. It's an interesting world 'being present'.

When it all gets a little too surreal, I seek some serenity in Balboa Park, which houses San Diego Zoo. Northeast of downtown San Diego, it has eight gardens and some 15 museums with information on everything from astronomy to zoology. Later I visit La Jolla Cove on Coast Boulevard and take an energising walk along the sandstone cliffs.

On the way to the airport I stop off at Solana Beach, overlooked by chic boutiques, and spend a few hours surfing the waves with the best of the bronzed Californians.

As I watch the waves roll in and out, I understand Deepak's tweet for the first time. Back in the car, I press my foot down on the accelerator, confident I've dumped my bag of worries. Sure, they may follow me on the next flight home, but this time I'll acknowledge them and move on. **SPIRIT&DESTINY**

Traveller's checks

More holistic holiday ideas to take you off the beaten track

THE PEAK OF HEALTH

Experience the rejuvenating powers of the mountains on a Yoga Adventure week in the French Alps (28 July). Staying in a renovated farmhouse an hour from Geneva, you'll enjoy morning hatha yoga followed by activities depending on your interests and budget. Choose from hiking, horse-riding, rock-climbing, swimming in alpine lakes, massage and more. The food is healthy, mainly veggie and largely organic. Prices from £695 for seven nights half-board, excluding flights. Call 01273-600030 or visit www.responsibletravel.com



TELETUBBIES SAY ECO!

They may look like a scene from CBeebies, but these Atlantic Surf Pods are far from make-believe. Built on a farm in Bude, north Cornwall, they're eco-friendly, off-grid and just an hour's drive from the Eden Project or Padstow, should you be planning a trip to the town's famous May Day celebrations. From £65 a night. Visit www.oneoffplaces.co.uk

GIVE IT SOME JUICE

For a midsummer health boost, why not try a juice fast? Jiva Healing is hosting two Juice Fasting Retreats just inland from Turkey's Aegean coast from 4-11 June and 11-18 June. Your body's systems will be cleansed and refreshed on a diet of organic juices, detoxing herbs and vegetable broth. Self-administered enemas and daily yoga are also part of the programme, along with classes on nutrition, meditation and happiness. Accommodation is in a hillside hotel. From £720 per person, excluding flights and transfers (the nearest airport is Dalaman). Visit www.jivahealing.com

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

If you'd like to learn the art of massage, try combining it with a tropical boutique holiday. Absolute Sanctuary on the Thai island of Koh Samui is hosting a Shiatsu Immersion Programme from 5-12 July, including a 25-hour shiatsu course taught by Japanese shiatsu master Yutaka Homma, with daily yoga, complimentary massages and fitness classes. At the end of the course you'll be awarded a certificate from the Japan Shiatsu Promotion & Academy. Prices start at around 38,900 Thai baht (£811), full-board, excluding flights. Visit www.absolutesanctuary.com

FACT FILE

- Virgin Atlantic flies from London Heathrow to Los Angeles International Airport, from £524.96 return. Call 0844-209 7777 or visit www.virgin-atlantic.com
- The Chopra Center events for 2012 include meditation retreats, mind-body healing workshops and emotional healing intensives, most led by Deepak Chopra, or the centre's teachers and guest presenters. Prices range from £185 to £2,894. Room prices are not included. La Costa offers a discounted rate of £106 per room to single guests including breakfast and lunch. To find out more visit www.chopra.com
- Deepak Chopra's interactive game, *Leela*, is out now on Kinect for Xbox 360 or Wii, from £17.18. Available from online stores such as Amazon.co.uk and Play.com