

FLOW RIDER

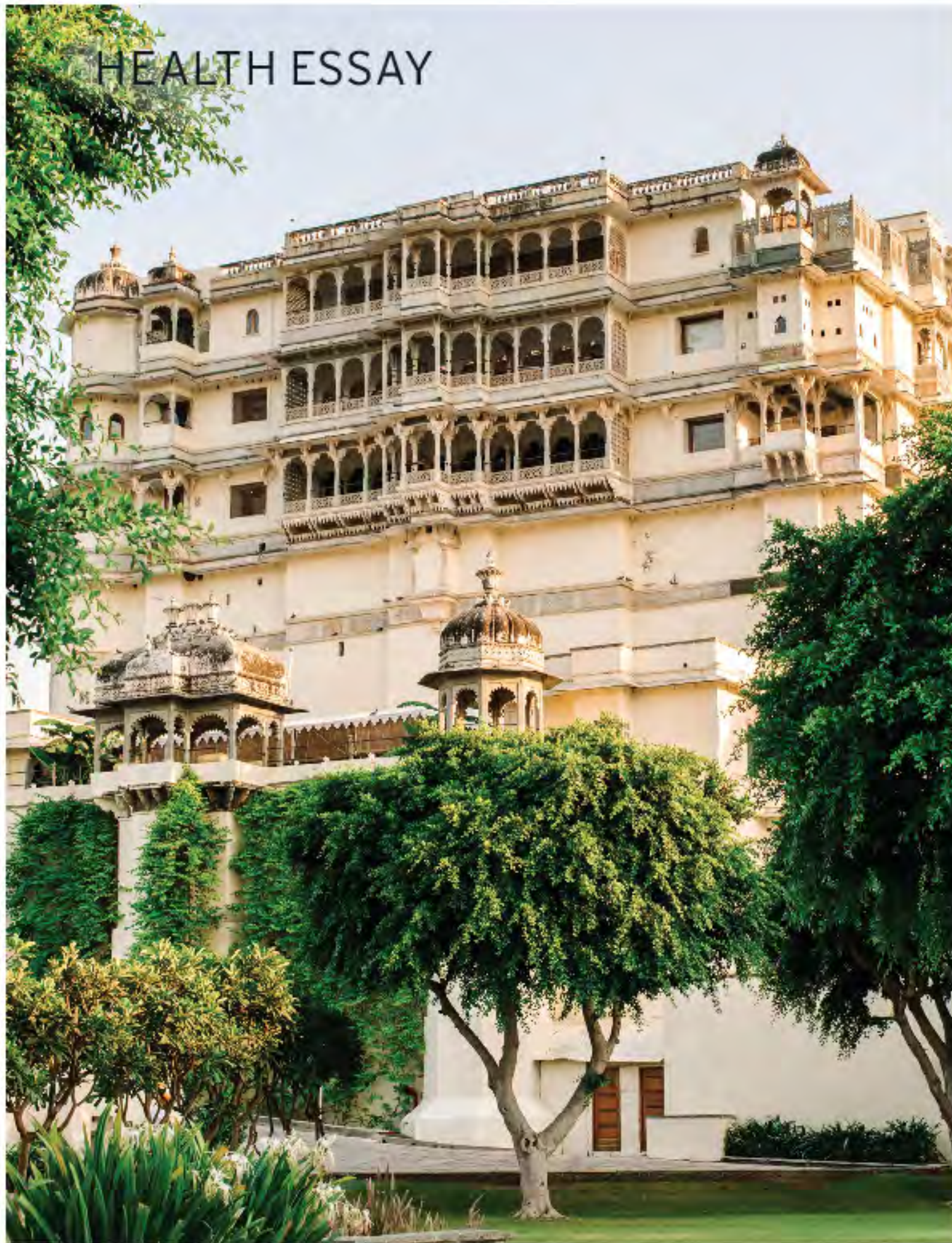
WE'VE PUNISHED OURSELVES WITH HARD-CORE DETOXES AND GRUELLING ASSAULT CHALLENGES. WE'VE LISTENED TO EVERYTHING THAT'S WRONG WITH US, FROM OUR DIETS TO OUR STRESS LEVELS. BUT NOW A NEW SPA PROGRAMME IS SWITCHING THE TREND BY PRESCRIBING TOTAL IMMERSION IN A FAR MORE JOYFUL ADVENTURE

BY DAISY FINER. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANA LUI



The outdoor hot tub at RAAS Devigarh in Rajasthan. Opposite, a bathroom at the hotel

HEALTH ESSAY



Clockwise from left: RAAS Devigarh's exterior; a terrace with hill views; tiger castings in the Palace Suite; ornaments and a painting in the Devigarh Suite

BIBLICAL MONSOON RAINS HAVE BEEN WASHING the 18th-century Indian palace all afternoon. Hour after hour, a soft and rather beautiful storm. Small rivers gush down milky-white stone steps. Standing here barefoot with warm water up to my calves, I begin to wonder if this is Mother Earth herself welcoming in a time for change since everything that is happening right now at RAAS Devigarh is focused on profound and authentic transformation.

'I don't think you own a building like this, it owns you,' says Nikhilendra Singh, the force behind this new departure, whose

respectful, full-blooded approach, one that understood privacy and partying in equal measure, and honoured the unique otherworldliness of the building, with its Mawari horse murals, secret passageways and flowering night jasmine.

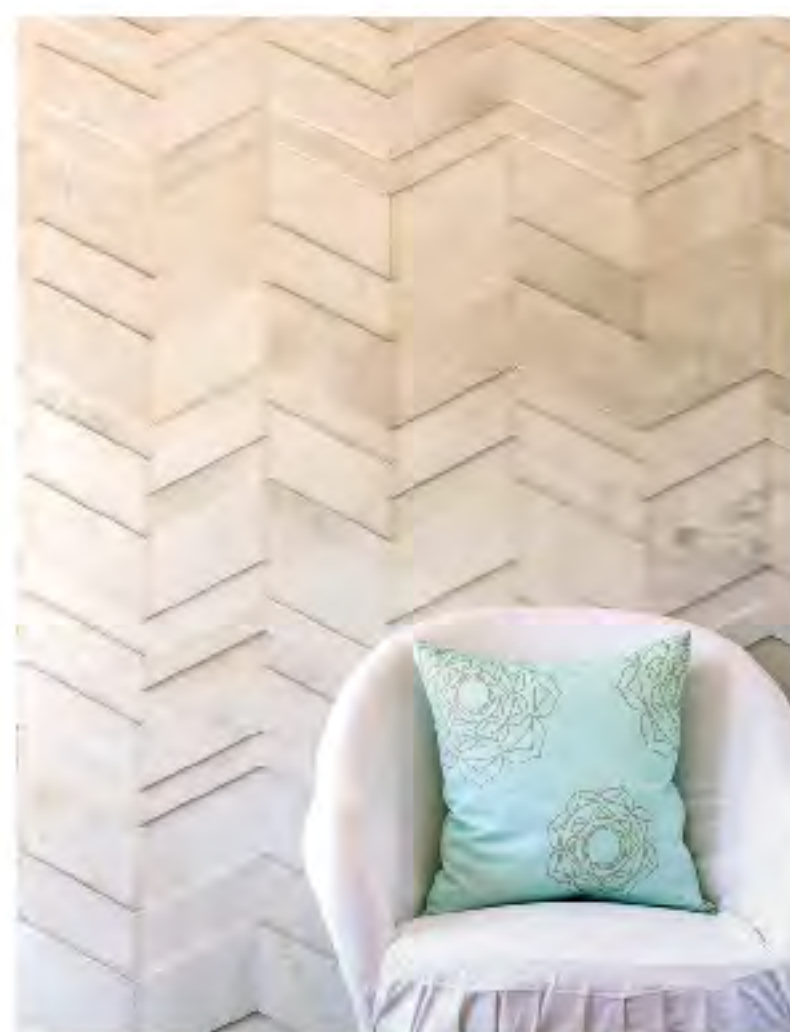
When I visited the hotel in its previous incarnation, the spa was incongruously run by French brand L'Occitane and the restaurant was a boxed-in glass cube. Now wide doors throughout showcase the surrounding Aravalli Hills. More ancient than the Himalayas, these are some of the oldest landmasses in India. Look around and you feel the magnetic pull of the landscape. The scene

THIS IS A POTENT PLACE BY ANY STANDARDS. NOTHING IN MY EXPERIENCE MATCHES

RAAS property in Jodhpur marked a giant leap forward on the Indian boutique-hotel scene when it opened in 2009. It showcased gloriously how heritage buildings could not only be ravishingly repaired, but also combined with contemporary interiors, superb service and restaurants with buzz. Singh is renowned for his elegant, sophisticated and swashbuckling touch: nothing pretentious, nothing formal. He wanders about in shorts, with his blue-eyed husky Baboo, and beloved Jack Russell Charles, who he sometimes pretends to hurl off balconies. This in no way belies his personal dedication to India's cultural and architectural preservation. The fact that one of the country's master hoteliers now has his hands on RAAS Devigarh is rightly causing ripples of excitement. For while it has always been a monumental building, one somehow felt it lacked a

moves to its own rhythm: plodding cows, the flash of a glittering pink sari, lines of laundry, smoking fires, barking dogs, Jain temples. And then, the birds, swooping and soaring, the volume of their call increasing as the taintless orb of the sun sets and they seemingly own the skies. This is no secret hideaway; it is an open heart and all the richer for it.

While India's other new destination spa, Vana, in the Himalayan foothills, has modern, clean-lined architecture, several spa wings and a muted retreat vibe, RAAS Devigarh is an intimate immersion into a theatrical and primordial dreamscape. One where the unique bedrooms, pretty slate-green swimming pool, refreshed dining spots, a new bar (a little bit clubhouse with books and backgammon), spectacular outdoor hot tub and gym are all actually secondary to the beguiling atmosphere. Fundamentally,



Clockwise from far left: a meditation room with sadhu inscriptions; a spa treatment room; a bedroom; the Devigarh Suite; plants in the spa garden

this is what holds you. When the rain stops, the air feels energetically charged, silent but not remotely empty.

And at last, the palace has a spa aligned to its splendour. This is the first destination outpost from the holistically focused British brand Ila, known for its wild-harvested ingredients, most of them sourced from India. These include Rajasthani damascene rose otto oil (picked at dawn for the highest potency), jasmine from Tamil Nadu, sandalwood from Mysore, and Himachal tuberose. Every ingredient is chosen by founder Denise Leicester for its ability to nourish not just the skin but the heart as well. The week-

consciousness, they have a tender touch that seems devotional. These are rituals of restoration, delicately and subtly executed. They vibrate with an incredible wisdom and sensitivity. Nothing in my experience matches their ceremonious mood, nor their positive effects; not even a heart-lifting dawn yoga class at COMO Shambhala, a deeply moving cabana massage in the rain at Kamalaya on Koh Samui, nor an incredible session with the shamanic healer based at Borgo Egnazia in Italy.

A new wellness-food menu includes the likes of moog lentil and holy basil soup, home-grown salads and *khichdi*, a mixture

THE CEREMONIOUS MOOD OR POSITIVE EFFECTS OF THE RETREAT OFFERED HERE

long retreats now launched at RAAS Devigarh are a comprehensive experience. The treatments themselves, each two hours long and focused on a different chakra, have been especially designed, and each reveals its own meaningful surprises.

Burning amber is used to ground the root chakra; warmed rose oil is poured directly into a little nest over your heart; a liquid light energy known as 'sole' hydrates skin at the deepest level; purifying palo santo incense is wafted around with a giant white feather. Other highlights include a raindrop spine massage, reflexology for the kosha bodies (or layers of being), cranial holds, and body scrubs made with 200-million-year-old Himalayan salt mixed with warmed poppy seeds, chosen for their ability to soothe inner vulnerabilities. Beautiful Tibetan and Bhutanese therapists whisper chants and play healing sound bowls. Trained in heart

of yellow lentils and brown rice known for its cleansing properties. But it is the breakfasts that are especially delicious: zingy juices, spiced omelettes, wholewheat pancakes, porridge made with turmeric milk, and dosas. Everything tastes nourishing and light without being depriving.

Days start with a knock on your door heralding 'bed tea', a little tray with a sticky energy ball and a pot of masala chai or fresh ginger tea left just outside your door (so no chat necessary). Next, a dawn yoga session. Yoga by Ila is different – soft and centred on subtle energy work. Pick between balancing, restoring, grounding or energising, depending on your mood: Faraaz, the wise-man spa manager, will help you find your way. All work to increase vitality by awakening the chakras, focusing on marma points, and tuning in with 'the peaceful breath'. Alongside ➤



Clockwise from top left: a stone seat; interior detail; the outdoor terrace of the Devigarh Suite; spa relaxation area; a painting in the spa

► yoga, there's a meditation menu that includes om and ram chanting sessions, and gloriously engulfing crystal-bowl sound healing. All these delights take place in gorgeous hidden nooks of the building, such as the Sheesh Mahal, covered in silver and coloured glass and, equally special, a room in which a sadhu meditated when the palace was in ruins for 20 years; his writings still inscribed on the walls. Candles, petals and wonderful heady aromas transport you through the reverie.

Ila's Devi Blessing Journeys are designed to help you get back to your blissful natural state of being, swapping stress and tension

great spirit of the palace. It is being polished, primed and opened up with reverence; so too are you.

RAAS Devigarh is potent. To stay here is to obtain a steady, surprising and joyous sense of resting in what by any standards can only be described as the perfect spot. It is to lie on your back under a vast and spectacular hot Indian sky and watch shooting stars burst into being. Time, space, energy, alchemy, serendipity: everything mystical and magical is alive and palpable in the bones of the building. It is a wondrous blend of ancient beauty and new-world cool. It is a late-night Dark and

GET HERE BEFORE THE ENCHANTMENT RENDERS IT IMPOSSIBLE TO BAG A ROOM

for a return to self. Programmes run for three, five or nine nights, or simply dip in as you fancy at the end of a Rajasthan recce. Although don't expect such happy-making results after a fleeting visit; the whole is definitely more than the sum of parts. After just five days here I have a sense of being lost in a delirious soup of cosmic consciousness. I cannot imagine how powerful a nine-night stay might be. The mix is intoxicating, every aspect carefully calibrated to relax the central nervous system, endocrine glands and adrenals. Softly you drop; remarkably quickly you feel the fizz. No detox tears, no depressing tests or weigh-ins. It is impossible to stop smiling. Especially when you add in a hand-carved Himalayan salt cave, silent days, bedtime poems, Vedic astrology readings, and candle-cocooned private dinners. This is no stark Ayurvedic centre or anodyne five-star bubble. A sort of beauty overdose floods through you. There is an incredible natural high that comes from being surrounded by the

Stormy cocktail, a funky tune to hum along to, a tented slumber. There are few better places on earth to be rocked into your whole and most exuberant self. And certainly nowhere in the world right now is as riveting – rooted in the deep heritage of the land but with a seductively hip and stylish outlook, and a sanctified spa that weaves spells of happiness. Get here before the enchantment renders it impossible to bag a room. A lavish star has been reborn. 'Div' comes from the Sanskrit word to shine, 'devi' is the shining one, and it is indeed RAAS Devigarh's time to shine. **T**

Healing Holidays (+44 20 7843 5592; healingholidays.co.uk) offers five nights at RAAS Devigarh staying in a Garden Suite from £2,499 per person full board on a five-day Blessing Journey, flights from Heathrow and transfers