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HEALTHY & MERRY CHRISTMAS



AJAHN CHAH
TEACHER'S PAIN

ayurveda
THE Love of
Chocolate

MIDNIGHT
YOGA &
MOONBATHING

TAI CHI
CHUAN &
QI GONG
MEDITATION

GOLI H. CRAMER
PRENATAL
YOGA FLOW

NIRAJ NAIK
RHYTHMIC
BREATHING
HEALING POWER



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HOW A YOGA HOLIDAY IN PORTUGAL LED TO PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION FOR THIS DOCTOR AND YOGI

Words: Ingrid Yang

Photo Credit: Six Senses Douro Valley

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After 18 months of caring for sick patients in the COVID-19 wards of the hospital and being relegated to practising yoga on Zoom, I felt disconnected from myself and my yoga practice. I knew there was something I had to do to combat the demoralisation caused by the challenges of 2020 and find connection to myself again. After some thought, I decided to break my travel embargo by visiting Portugal. With 98% of eligible adults fully vaccinated against COVID-19, Portugal is one of the safest and easiest countries to visit during the ongoing pandemic. So for yogis looking to quench their yoga-inspired wanderlust, Portugal is well worth the trip. It is in this UNESCO-protected territory where I made an inspired visit to the stunning wellness resort, Six Senses Douro Valley.





Let me first share with you the magic that lies within Douro Valley. There are places in the world that you travel to because of their inspirational scenery. And other destinations where you go to philosophise on the meaning of life. And still, other places where the environment allows you to reset habits and transform your life. The Douro Valley in northern Portugal does all of these things, while also providing the perfect backdrop for a personal yoga retreat. Located just 60 miles from the historic city of Porto, this sublime valley is one of Portugal's best kept secrets. Here, you will find dreamy landscapes of elegantly terraced vineyards that create patchwork quilts that roll down to the magnificent Douro River.

Six Senses Douro Valley is not only the most luxurious holiday

experience in the region, but also focusses on wellness and holistic yoga. Set in a beautifully renovated 19th-century manor house, this resort offers a variety of yoga, breathwork and meditation classes on the regular schedule of activities. But the steadfast yoga fans may want to opt for a dedicated, personalised yoga retreat that includes programmes such as Yoga Detox, Yogic Sleep, or Discover Yoga. Each programme offers 3, 5, 7 or 10 night options. Based on my experience, any amount of time will benefit you, but the longer you stay, the more opportunity you will have for spiritual transformation.

Each of the thoughtfully designed yoga programmes include daily personalised yoga *asana* sessions, as well as separate sessions focussed on pranayama, guided meditations,

and spa treatments. As a long-time yoga practitioner, I initially chose the Yoga Detox programme, however every package can be adapted to your individual needs. The yoga detox programme is designed to cleanse the body and mind; it formulates a plan to increase energy levels, improve clarity, quiet the mind and boost the immune system.

Upon my arrival to Six Senses Douro Valley, I was escorted into the redesigned main building by Aqua, the delightfully gentle vineyard dog. The lobby was minimalist and elegant, but the real thrill was the magnificent view just to the left of the reception desk. As I walked onto the balcony that seemed to beckon me with sunlight and warmth, the view revealed a 270 degree view of the Douro River snaking its way through the rolling

hills of the vineyards. I was so awe-struck by the inspired beauty that my immediate reaction was an overjoyed gasp before I took a big inhalation of the pure, cleansing valley air; the *prana* was palpable. I felt at peace for the first time in months.

My individualised yoga retreat began with an integrative wellness screening with a certified health professional, who asked me a series of health-related questions on what I hoped to accomplish during my stay at Six Senses Douro Valley. The questions well-encompassed the second limb of yoga, the *niyamas*, self-discipline and spiritual observances. How was I sleeping? What had I been eating? How often was I exercising and meditating? Based on my answers, the questions got deep, and sometimes personal, and it felt natural to share my story with my guide - she knew what my body and heart would need to heal. Then, my skin temperature, heart rate, blood pressure, and a series of other measurements were taken to obtain my objective



health data. Little did I know, but it was this kind of attention to detail that transformed my personalised experience from a simple yoga retreat to a true spiritual journey.

After receiving the results of my integrative wellness assessment, I realised that I should also incorporate aspects of the Yogic Sleep and Discover Yoga programmes into my retreat. The stress levels of the pandemic had negatively affected my circadian rhythms, and Yogic Sleep includes a sleep-tracking system, yoga *nidra*, and specific pranayama training to help with both sleep initiation and sleep maintenance. Additionally, after missing a regular, dedicated yoga practice, I decided to also incorporate aspects of Discover Yoga to re-discover the fundamentals of yoga philosophy and build up my resilience to change. Because if yoga teaches us nothing else, it is how to be receptive to change, especially during this pandemic, which has been anything but normal life.



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Each session started with an intention that centred me into the moment, and all the senses were incorporated into the personally tailored meditation and pranayama practices. The instructors knew when to challenge me and when to encourage softness and tenderness, which in turn gave me permission to re-connect to the innate wisdom within. I learned to trust myself again with the embodied asana practices and be quiet again in the mindfulness exercises. Each subsequent practice and treatment seemed to peel away the layers of exhaustion and grief from the last 18 months on the front lines of the pandemic. And I felt more liberated and open-hearted as each day passed.



Unquestionably, the beauty of the landscape and valley around me allowed me to dig deeper in the yoga practices, and were an important adjunct to my spiritual journey in Douro Valley. In between yoga sessions, I would gleefully enjoy heart-centred walks through the forest and take daily bike rides through the vineyards. I even went out on a limb (pun intended) and challenged myself with a tree climbing class; because nothing is more therapeutic than hugging a tree while practising tree pose.

On the second afternoon of my stay, I wandered down to the Earth Lab, curious about what a lab about earth would reveal. The rectangular 300-sq foot room seemed initially non-descript, but when I delved deeper, I discovered the lengths to

which Six Senses dedicates its efforts to sustainability. The Earth Lab is the heart centre, the proverbial *anahata* chakra, of Six Senses, where reducing waste and consumption is done in quiet respect for the surrounding community and ecosystem. It is a celebration of the Douro Valley as a home and source of life; a place where one can learn about the region's long-standing traditions of food preservation like picking, dehydration, composting and planting. I could have spent my entire day there; I pulled leaves off dehydrated thyme and pickled vegetables that were harvested from the on-property garden. These simple acts left me feeling renewed and in perfect synchronicity within the intention of karmic yoga and the circle of life.



Each of the resort's yoga packages includes personalised massages, including Indian head and deep tissue massage. My treatment started with a sound bath to balance my *chakras* and prepare me for the blissful rest that was to come. The Six Senses' 2,200sq. meter spa houses a heated indoor pool, and saunas with floor to ceiling windows that look out directly into the forest. This natural ambiance engendered a feeling in me of deep-seated relaxation and reconnection with the true essence

of life. As I gazed out from the sauna into the canopy of trees with sunlight peeking through the leaves, I found myself wondering how I felt so much quieter and more grounded after just three days in Douro Valley. Had time slowed down, or had I transformed into a lighter, brighter version of myself?

Although my experience at Six Senses Douro Valley did not magically translate into my ability to bend time and space to transform three days

into a month, the experience did catalyse my personal transformation into greater resilience and peace of mind. And after such a trying year and a half, the holistic healing opportunities available, in and around this extraordinary resort, were just what the doctor ordered. And for any other yogis seeking a mindful respite for their weary souls, this retreat will be sure to spark the inspiration for transformation.

Because if yoga teaches us nothing else, it is how to be receptive to change, especially during this pandemic.

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