

# CONFESSIONAL

A man who's battled with a devastating diagnosis and come out the other side still needing treatment and care beyond the medical offerings of a hospital

I WAS TOLD I HAD PANCREATIC CANCER about a year before I went to Vana, a beautiful health retreat in north-west India in the foothills of the Himalayas. Nothing much could have prepared me for what had happened in that year. It wasn't much fun. But I had also been incredibly lucky.

The symptoms of pancreatic cancer are so nebulous very few people are diagnosed early enough for surgery, which currently provides the only hope of a cure. In my case, the tumour had blocked my bile duct and caused me to become jaundiced, so it was only because people started commenting on my pallor that I went to the doctor. Ten days later, I was in hospital having what is known as a Whipple's procedure. Along with the tumour and part of the pancreas, I lost about half of my stomach, the entire duodenum and my gall bladder. My brilliant surgeon then attached the truncated bits back to my intestine, essentially replumbing me in the process.

I was told that recovery from the operation would take at least three months, after which I could probably go back to work in some capacity, but it would take at least twice that time before I felt anything like my old self. After surgery I lost about three stone – a lot of it through muscle wastage – as my system battled against the sudden assault, sucking up every last energy resource. My mind and body were united in shock.

A few weeks later I started six months of chemotherapy. I am told that I tolerated it well. I was only physically sick once, right at the beginning. At the end of it, I had my first set of scans (now marked on my calendar at three-monthly intervals) and there was no sign of cancer. I needed to take a deep breath, pause and take stock.

Checking into Vana is one of the best things I have ever done for myself. For a year I had been told how brave I was, what a positive attitude I held, how well I had done. Being brave and positive even for short periods can be exhausting. Try doing it for 12 months, and then some. Arriving at Vana meant I could hand over all responsibilities, along with my clothes (guests all wear the same plain *kurta* pyjamas) and my identity (I knew nobody there; nobody knew me). It felt a bit like a fresh chance.

Filling out a pre-arrival form with my medical history meant that the smart young doctor at Vana knew all about the operation;



he understood the frustrations of muscle wastage (opening a jam jar was a supreme effort at this stage) and the deep-bone dog-tiredness brought on by chemotherapy. We talked about how I might start to regain physical strength and enhance my mental focus, about the importance of limiting stress and the natural supplements that would help my body absorb the nutrients it so badly needed but now had difficulty processing.

The next seven days involved a personalised programme of traditional Tibetan Sowa Rigpa and Indian Ayurveda treatments, private gym sessions, body-composition analysis and nutritional advice. In between, I was free to join any of the daily classes, which included yoga, om chanting, cookery, and trips to Rishikesh on the River Ganges. Or I could read on a sun-lounger and swim lengths in the pool. I did all of the above.

## THE REMEDY

Vana in India, one of the world's top-level wellness retreats, which offers him the chance to repair himself both physically and emotionally

My stay felt a bit like revisiting university days – all that freedom and access to knowledge – without the hangovers or pressure of exams. Indeed, Vana is laid out like a handsome, contemporary campus, with the different treatment centres, residences and lofty central Kila (containing the two restaurants, reception and library) set in grounds scented with magnolia and jasmine. It's incredibly discreet, down a lane in a upmarket suburb of the city of Dehradun, surrounded by forest on three sides. I took comfort in the occasional sounds of daily life outside its walls, but I doubt even locals could give directions on how to get there or tell you what lies beyond those guarded gates.

The food in the main restaurant is delicious, carefully calibrated and prettily plated. Too late I discovered that it was possible to order double portions (which, given my high-protein requirements and the size of the kitchen's dainty offerings, would have been handy to know). I joined a hosted communal table on my first night but, charming as my fellow guests were, I stuck pretty much to myself after that, shielded in my chosen anonymity by a copy of Alex von Tunzelmann's *Indian Summer, The Secret History of the End of an Empire*.

Those who come here tend to be questing souls after some sort of resolution or respite. There were couples from Delhi, friends from London, New York and Berlin, mostly women but with a fair smattering of men. I met some really lovely people (I wasn't a complete hermit) and exchanged email addresses with one or two. But I suspect that what happens in Vana stays at Vana.

'Is this your first visit?' is the entry-level question here, and most *vanavasi*, as guests are known, have been two or three times before. Some check in twice a year. I can see why. I left feeling more in tune with my mind and body than I had in a very long time, like an enhanced version of myself. For that I will be eternally grateful.

**BOOK IT** *Healing Holidays* (+44 20 7843 3592; [healingholidays.co.uk/condenast](http://healingholidays.co.uk/condenast)) offers seven nights from £2,450 per person, full board, including flights, transfers and a personalised wellness programme. *Healing Holidays* is the only UK operator that works with Vana. For information on pancreatic cancer visit [pancreaticcancer.org.uk](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk)