

A spiritual oasis

Nestled in the Malavli Hills, an hour's drive from Pune airport and a three-kilometre walk from the Karla Caves (ancient Indian Buddhist shrines) is The Vedanta Academy. This lush spiritual retreat attracts students and guests from all over the world. The 25-acre campus is surrounded by verdant landscape – fig, mango and palm trees, powder puffs and spider lily flowers. As you stroll through the manicured gardens, you can hear a myriad of sounds, from the cooing of mynas to the tweeting of Siberian birds, which migrate here during summer. There's also the distant whistling of old-fashioned trains pulling into the nearby railway station.

The founder of this institute is Swami Parthasarathy, affectionately known as Swamiji. After renouncing a lucrative family shipping business, Swamiji dedicated his life to the study, research and propagation of Vedanta. It is the culmination of knowledge based on ancient Sanskrit scriptures known as the Vedas.

Swamiji is not only a living spiritual master, he's a respected philosopher, orator and author of 10 books. He's in the process of writing his next one. When he's not touring the world – from Australia to America – lecturing on subjects particularly poignant to each country's denizens, he inspires his resident students. At 86, Swamiji is a living testament to his philosophy. He looks much younger than his years and still maintains a razor-sharp intellect, imparting his nuggets of wisdom laced with humour. He jogs daily, still plays cricket and has been happily married to his wife, Kausalya, for nearly 60 years. His daughter-disciple, Sunandaji, also lectures at the academy and abroad.

The daily schedule

The wake-up call is at 4.15am, when an outdoor bell is rung several times by one of the early bird students and the echoes across the campus. After outdoor prayers, individual study occurs between 4.30am and 5.45am. Philosophers say this is the spiritual primetime (brahmamuhurta) when the mind is most alert. »

Sarah Bladen visits The Vedanta Academy in India and immerses herself in a **philosophy designed to lead to the ultimate goal of self-realisation**

Swami Parthasarathy has dedicated his life to the study, research and propagation of The Vedanta Academy.



Study at The Vedanta Academy:

The Vedanta Academy offers three-year full-time residential courses for local and international students. Fees are donation based and guest students are welcome, although prior permission and a confirmed booking is needed before arrival. Guests can be picked up by taxi from Mumbai and Pune airports and this service can be arranged by the academy on request. For lectures and study schedules, visit www.vedantaworld.org



retreat

Yogis will appreciate the 6.20am yoga classes, which take place in a spacious hall (Prashanta), a light space with open French windows attracting a light breeze, which cools your body during the postures. The classes are taught by the students – in fact the whole campus is run by them. Some ashrams hire outside staff but here the ethos is to do karma yoga – which means functioning in the spirit of service and sacrifice – so students help prepare the delicious ayurvedic-inspired vegetarian cuisine, tidy and clean the buildings and are given responsibilities such as looking after the library or taking care of administration. Everyone has a selfless role to play to keep the academy running smoothly.

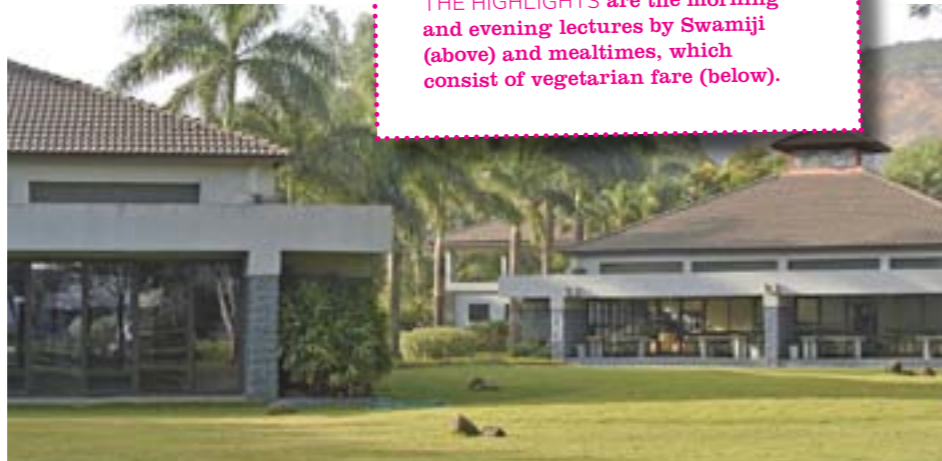
The highlights are the morning and evening lectures given by Swamiji, where girls are clad in salwar kameez uniforms while boys wear the kurta and dhoti. Sometimes there is a 'Big Group Discussion', other times smaller groups get together to debate philosophical topics ranging from reincarnation to the law of karma. The texts include the *Fall of the Human Intellect*, the *Vedanta Treatise* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. All the practical concepts help towards creating a calm mind free from the constant flow of desires.

Besides developing a strong intellect, keeping fit is also encouraged. There's table tennis, a fully equipped gym, a jogging track, a basketball court, a volleyball court and a cricket ground.

Before each meal, students repeat meaningful Sanskrit mantras and on Friday evenings, they fast to remember the less fortunate and to understand the value of appetite. Contact with the outside world is discouraged so students can absorb the philosophy more fully, without distraction. The strict schedule is designed to hone skills such as discipline, punctuality, cleanliness and co-operation. The constant routine has a scientific element as it allows you to monitor



THE HIGHLIGHTS are the morning and evening lectures by Swamiji (above) and mealtimes, which consist of vegetarian fare (below).



your own self-development and change in behavioural patterns.

Once the students have finished the three-year course, some become full-time residents while others assimilate in the outside world, spreading the enlightening message

and teaching others practical skills. Armed with extraordinary life skills, the evolved scholars are able to sail through modern life taking everything in their stride with a combination of dynamic action and peace of mind.

Sarah's experience

Since India is only a three-hour flight from Dubai, I've come here on spiritual quest with my equally curious 'seeker' friend, an Italian magazine editor. As soon as we step outside Pune airport, the scorchingly dry heat hits us. To our relief our driver is holding up a placard with the name of our retreat.

En route, the infectious Jai Ho song crackles through the radio while we soak in the ambience – the relentless beeping of traffic, the dusty rubble and shabby stalls interspersed with colourful sari-clad women and fiery orange blossoms hanging from the Fire of the Forest trees. It's a beautiful assault on all of the senses.

Drawing closer to the majestic foothills, a sense of anticipation arises. Once we enter the front gate, we are greeted by a sea of cream uniforms – it feels like a university campus with a desi twist. There's lush greenery everywhere and it sounds like a mini musical – tweeting and cooing calls echo from the treetops.

We soon discover our daily schedule involves waking up at 4.15am. Despite this being spiritual primetime, my Italian friend is rolling her eyes in fear and I have to admit that I'm also worried about such an early rise. We then discover that there's no Wi-Fi in our room and the internet signal is sketchy at best. One of the students from LA, who is taking the three-year course, reveals they never watch TV and rarely use the internet. She missed the US presidential election and has never heard of the Kardashians. Perhaps limiting contact with the outside world isn't such a bad idea.

In line with the spiritual ethos, the lights are eco-friendly and designed not to kill any insects. In fact, everything is designed to induce a sense of inner peace, although the routine is not easy to follow at first and involves breaking old habits.

There's a very defined timetable here and the other students explain that the purpose behind the strict

routine is simple – it remains constant to allow the monitoring of your self-development. And sure enough, over the next few days we're acutely aware of our behavioural patterns, which involve neglecting some of the rules.

However, by day five we're starting to relish the simple pleasures of life – the crisp, morning air before our 6.20am yoga class and the tasty vegetarian dishes. Over homemade curry and mango pudding, we enjoy lively philosophical debates with fellow students.

The idea behind this philosophy, which is based on ancient Sanskrit texts called the *Vedas*, is to rebuild and sharpen the intellect to cross the barriers to spiritual enlightenment. The texts get us thinking about the meaning of life and death, and listening to our guru is like feeding the soul.

Swamiji doesn't mince his words and declares that people are living by what he calls the 'herd instinct'

and that desire, attachment, ego and greed have devastated the human race. Meanwhile relationships are more fractured than ever. In the West, divorce is rife and according to this philosophy, the notion of love has become distorted. Most of the time what we think is love is actually 'preferential attachment' – a selfish, ego-driven kind of love.

By contrast, the universal love of a self-realised soul has no trace of selfishness or anxiety. It's an inclusive love, rather than an exclusive attachment to just one person. Real love involves cultivating and sharing rays of positivity with many – love the world and it will love you back.

We are captivated by this concept of spiritual love and realise that if everyone radiated true love then the world would be a much happier and more peaceful place. ✨

For more information go to www.vedantaworld.org or email visitinfo@vedantaworld.org

Which temperament are you?

According to Vedanta philosophy, there are three mental temperaments of every human. They are known as gunas in Sanskrit. Each has a distinct character and most individuals possess aspects of all three gunas.

Rajas Active

Rajas is the state of passionate, desirous and agitated thoughts, when a person bristles with frenzied actions leading to his involvement in the affairs of the world.

Tamas Inactive

Tamas is the state of thoughts in inertia, a mood of lethargy, indolence, indifference, a condition of sloth and sleep with no intellectual conviction to pursue, nor emotional feeling to manifest. A person steeped in tamas lives a full, inactive life with hardly any response to the world.

Sattva Trans-active

Sattva is the state of thoughts in equanimity, serenity, objectivity, when a person is poised, mature, contemplative, detached from worldly involvement and excitement, hence the termed trans-active.