

Wedding at the Ashram

Namaste!

"No meat, fish, fowl, eggs, garlic, onion, gelatin, mushrooms, alcohol, "the ashram confirmation warned. "So what do they eat?" I wondered. "Sand from their beach? I mean, what else is there?"

Worse yet, it said all yoga exercises are mandatory. As in the piña colada song, I am not into yoga and needed to escape. Luckily, I called my sister, the bride-to-be, and learned they were not really going to make me do yoga. Still, I had my doubts.

According to their website, "an ashram is a spiritual learning center, where students and practitioners go to study, practice, and live in a devotional community, traditionally under the guidance of a particular teacher." This particular teacher was Swami (yes, they really do have swamis and gurus) Vishnudevananda and was based on the teachings of Swami Sivananda, a 20th century spiritual teacher whose full name was Sivananda Saraswati. A swami is spiritual teacher who has taken vows of renunciation according to the yogic tradition. According to

his Wikipedia entry, Swami Sivananda's motto was "Be good, do good."

I could live with that.

This was going to be a one-day trip, although it felt more like a week. I arrived at the ashram around 11:00 pm the night before the wedding. To get there it took a three-hour flight to Miami, with a two-hour layover there, followed by a half-hour puddle jumper to Paradise Island, a half-hour cab ride to a boat landing, and a short skiff jaunt to the ashram. Yeah, I was tired. And there was no front desk, no lobby. Instead, what passed for a check-in was the boat captain, who apparently doubled as a bellhop, knocking on some flimsy cabin doors to see if they were occupied. If they were, the guests groaned, unwelcomely awakened from their yogic sleep. I wondered whether yogis sleep differently from everyone else. Maybe they sleep sitting up cross-legged, with the tips of their index fingers touching their thumbs. Instead of snoring, maybe they say "Ohmm." In any event, after three knocks on three different cabins, Captain Bellhop knocked on a door from which no groan emanated. My room.

I tried to tip Captain Bellhop, but he seemed insulted and refused. Part of the eastern ascetic thing I supposed. No filthy lucre changing hands here! I wish I had known what kind of spiritual fulfillment I could have given him, but unfortunately I am not the spiritual type.

The cabin had two beds on opposite sides of the room, and mercifully neither was taken. I thought I might have had to share a room with a complete stranger, a swami perhaps. I dumped my suitcase on one of the beds and plopped down on the other, ready to lapse into a deep, travel-induced coma, until I caught sight of an unusually large picture of some kind of white-turbaned Maharishi looming over the bed. Switching beds was not an option, as there was another, equally scary Maharishi on the opposite wall. Now, I try very hard not to be xenophobic, but the sheer size of the photos, combined with the red bindis on their foreheads, together with the big, white turbans and their large probing dark eyes that I imagined were prying into my soul, I'm ashamed to admit it kind of creeped me out. I imagined they were there to somehow soothe the yogis as they slept or prepared to sleep, a

spiritual presence watching over them, but they had the opposite effect on me. It felt as though they were leering at me. Perhaps shaming me for being an omnivore and not into yoga.

Despite the staring Maharishi, I soon dozed off from sheer travel fatigue. But it felt as if I had only been asleep for about 15 minutes when a gong sounded and slim rays of early morning sunlight came pouring through the cracks in the rickety cabin walls. In my sleep-deprived stupor I thought, "Oh no, the mandatory early morning yoga sessions. They are going to barge into my unlocked cabin, drag me from my bed, and turn me into a contortionist with their 'up dog/down dog' maneuvers." The closest thing to yoga for me was reaching for my cellphone when it fell out in my car.

So I put the pillow over my head to try to both muffle the sound of the gong and pretend the bed was unoccupied if they came to "git" me. Thankfully, they left me alone.

The gong was soon replaced by chanting, which I later found out is called Kirtan. Kirtan is a Sanskrit word that means "narrating, reciting,

telling, describing" of an idea or story. A Kirtana is a call-and-response style song or chant, set to music, wherein multiple singers recite or describe a legend, or express loving devotion to a deity, or discuss spiritual ideas. But they were chanting the same strange kirtana over and over and over again. In fact, I still can't get that kirtana out of my head. It was in Sanskrit, but it sounded like, "Goats by day, goats by day, something goats by day." I could not help speculating about what is it they do by night.

The chanting and yoga exercises continued through the morning. I tried to doze back off, and might have managed some kind of half sleep. I dreamt I was on "The Gong Show" with Chuck Berris. I was singing "Feelings, nothing more than feelings," and Gene, Gene the Dancing Machine humiliated me by banging the gong after I crooned only two lines. Just like the real gong earlier, the dream gong and the laughing TV audience woke me up again. Rather than try to get back to sleep yet again, I motivated myself to get up and start getting ready for my sister's wedding.

The cabin had no en suite bathroom. Instead, I vaguely recalled Captain Bellhop telling me the night before there was a communal bathroom outside the cabin and down a dirt path. I didn't pack a bathrobe, so I had to peer out the door looking for stray ascetics. Not seeing any, I scurried down the dirt path in a bathing suit to the communal bathroom, which turned out to be little more than an outhouse. Worse, it seemed like a coed outhouse.

At least I had it all to myself while the ascetics practiced their yoga, at the outset anyway. When I got into the shower and tried to lather up, I found the soap dispenser empty. The yogis must have used it all up during their pre-gong showers. The last time I had to bring my own soap was in college, when we had those little plastic snap tight containers. And no one, not the ashram in their no-food policy confirmation, nor my sister while allaying my fears about the mandatory yoga, told me to bring my own soap.

Fortunately, there was a soap dispenser at the sink with a tiny amount of pink liquid soap left. But to get there I had to run out of the

shower buck naked, desperately hoping one of the ascetics would not come back from his (or her) yoga exercises to use the facilities. I had to repeat this process each time I needed to lather up. And God forbid they would have a separate shampoo dispenser. Their Palmolive or whatever it was would have to make do for that as well. I figured if it was safe enough for Madge the manicurist in the old Palmolive commercial, it was safe enough to bathe with.

At least they had left a small—and I do mean small—towel on the bed with which I could dry off. Barely big enough to absorb most of the water, but not big enough to stretch across my ample waist. No, the bathing suit was back on and would have to do.

The ashram lay in the shadow of the famous Atlantis resort. The Atlantis was a monstrous complex of hotel buildings, swimming pools, restaurants, and its very own aquarium to rival the Shedd. Because of its shameless opulence and materialism, the yogis called it the Great Satan. I called it a private bathroom with soap. Had I known what I was in for, I would have gladly paid the \$500 or whatever exorbitance it cost for one

night. At least I would have gotten to walk their vaunted aquarium for free instead of shelling out the 20 bucks outsiders had to pay.

After I had washed away most of the travel from the previous day, the next project was getting into the light weight, summery wedding suit I had packed away. I scurried back to the Maharishi cabin up the dirt path, once again hoping not to run into any of the yogis in such a state of undress, which could have put them in DURress. I unpacked the now-wrinkled suit and put it on. Perhaps I would seem a little less bourgeois with the wrinkles.

Having managed to doze through breakfast, hunger was just about overtaking fatigue on my hierarchy of needs. I soon learned from some of the few staff not engaged in morning yoga exercises that there was no snack bar at the Ashram. All meals were communal (how could I have imagined otherwise?), and I would have to wait until their lunch break—whenever THAT was—to eat or satiate my hunger.

The staff wore all yellow and white. The white apparently represents purity, and the yellow is the color of a student of yoga. It

represents the spark of knowledge that eventually grows into a fire as the student continues his or her practice.

One of the few amenities I found—to them perhaps a luxury item—was a hammock stretched in the shade of two palm trees. So I decided to lie in the hammock until feeding time to try and catch up on some more of that sleep I had lost that morning from the Gong Show and their incessant chanting.

Once again noise awakened me, this time not from the gong, but from people lining up for lunch. Once again I had to rouse myself from a half sleep, this time to get in line. The yogis must have been even hungrier than I was, because by the time I got there I wound up at the back of the line. They seemed very invigorated talking with one another, perhaps about how complete their souls were after morning yoga.

I had no one to talk to because I had not run into my family yet. The only thing I had to look forward to was food, but when I got close enough to see the options, I was quickly dispirited. No meat, fish, fowl, eggs, garlic, onion gelatin, or mushrooms meant nothing good to eat for an

omnivore like me. The first large bowl looked like it had some kind of slop in it. The next one appeared to be mush. Then there were bowls of the icky kind of vegetables, everything other than the greens I know and love. About the only thing that appeared to be remotely edible for me was the basmati rice. No vindaloo. No tandoori. No passanda. None of my favorite Indian sauces and foods I had come to crave. They didn't even have any naan. How offensive could bread be to their scruples?

So I piled my plate exclusively with the basmati rice, to the abject stares of the ascetics. I didn't really care what they thought. These were weirdos whom I would never see again. I veritably vacuumed up the basmati rice with a plastic fork, and went back for seconds. No seconds, a white and yellow clad staff member told me. He made me feel like little Oliver Twist asking for "more." Part of the ascetic experience, I guess. Had I known no seconds were permitted, I would have piled even more basmati rice on my plate.

After I had my fill of starch, I was ready for another nap, but my sister's wedding was starting soon after lunch. The ceremony was to be

the highlight of the entire trip, because my sister and brother-in-law had chosen no fewer than six clergymen (or their equivalents) to officiate. The master of ceremonies turned out to be an Episcopal minister who just happened to be one of my father's college classmates. They had run into each other on the beach, having no idea the other would be there.

"Hi, John, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to officiate a wedding."

"What a coincidence, I'm here for a wedding too."

"Whose wedding?" Reverend John inquired.

"My daughter Sarah's."

"That's funny, I'm officiating Sarah's wedding."

My sister and I both went to our dad's small, preppie New England liberal arts college, so what were the odds there would be four alums from the same small school on Paradise Island at the same time?

When I finally found my parents, they had apparently already drunk the ashram's koolaid (in the very figurative sense, since I assume koolaid was among the many banned substances at the ashram). They were

wholeheartedly enjoying themselves with all the spiritual types. I could certainly understand my mom, because she was very much the ethereal type. But my dad? He was a lawyer and judge like I was. His sensible feet were supposed to be firmly planted on the ground, not the ashram's mushy sand. My own parents' conversion even further isolated me at the ashram and made me feel there was something very wrong about my disdain for the Spartan conditions surrounding me.

At the ceremony, Reverend John led the way with a 90-year-old rabbi at his side. I called him Rabbi Methuselah. I couldn't believe he could stand for so long, much less hold forth with a Jewish ceremony as he did for quite a few minutes.

Then there was a Tibetan monk, shoulders fully exposed by the crimson and gold robe he sported over most of the rest of his body.

An American Indian chieftain in full headdress. He recited the Blessing of the Apaches, which was to become the staple of my own wedding ceremonies:

Now you will feel no rain, for each of you will be shelter for the other. Now you will feel no cold, for each of you will be warmth to the other. Now there will be no loneliness, for each of you will be companion to the other. Now you are two persons, but there is only one life before you. May beauty surround you both in the journey ahead and through all the years. May happiness be your companion and your days together be good and long upon the earth. Treat yourselves and each other with respect, and remind yourselves often of what brought you together. Give the highest priority to the tenderness, gentleness and kindness that your connection deserves. When frustration, difficulties and fear assail your relationship, as they threaten all relationships at one time or another, remember to focus on what is right between you, not only the part which seems wrong. In this way, you can ride out the storms when clouds hide the face of the sun in your lives - remembering that even if you lose sight of it for a moment, the sun is still there. And if each of you takes responsibility for the quality of your life together, it will be marked by abundance and delight.

Next, there was the head Swami at the Ashram. The one thing I neglected to mention, perhaps because it was of such little consequence to me, as opposed to the swami, is that my sister was visibly pregnant. About seven months pregnant with my soon to be nephew, Ashoka. Apparently, Swami Sivananda's "Be good, do good" motto did not extend to shotgun weddings. The head swami disapproved of my sister's nuptials while visibly pregnant, and originally resisted the idea of co-officiating, or even permitting the wedding to take place at his sacred ashram. But he ultimately capitulated, and grudgingly agreed to say a few words.

Finally, a Franciscan monk also said a few words at the wedding—very few, because like the swami, he disapproved of the shotgun wedding. I have always been fascinated by the differences between the Catholic orders. I knew the Jesuits are known for education. The Franciscans I was less clear about. I knew they are disciples of St. Francis of Assisi, but not what they have a reputation for. Curiously (to me, at least), Pope Francis took his papal name from St. Francis of Assisi, but is

a Jesuit. Apparently, the Franciscans are known for their poverty, to experience solidarity with the poor and work for social justice. The perfect Catholic complement to the asceticism of the ashram.

The object of the last two clergymen's scorn, my soon-to-be nephew, was to be named after Ashoka the Great, an Indian emperor of the Maurya Dynasty, who ruled almost all the Indian subcontinent from about 268 to 232 BCE. My sister and brother-in-law certainly were committed to the eastern mysticism thing. Like most of the rest of the eastern mysticism thing at the ashram, I found my nephew's name to be singularly unattractive. I pictured the kids in middle school giving him swirlies and wedgies, and knocking the books out from under his 98-pound-weakling arms. Here I was giving my kids the most normal, innocuous names I could think of so they wouldn't get teased and bullied the rest of their lives, and my sister and brother-in-law name my nephew Ashoka.

The only other Ashoka I had ever heard of was Ashoka Mukpo, the unfortunate NBC cameraman afflicted with ebola a few years ago in

Liberia. I don't know which was uglier, his first or last name, but his first name was not appropriate for my nephew. At least he was still in utero at the time of the wedding.

One of the things I have appreciated most as a retired judge is my continued ability to officiate weddings. Few things are as uplifting for me as tying the knot between two people who love each other enough to pledge to spend the rest of their lives together, even if about half of them ultimately don't. I have performed literally hundreds of ceremonies during my sitting and retired judicial careers, straight weddings, gay weddings, Spanish weddings, and as of last month my first French wedding—tres belle! I am such a hopeless romantic that I still get choked up at some of the weddings I officiate. Really quite unprofessional, but I can't help it. I wonder whether my sister would have let me co-officiate her wedding had I had my robes at the time. I am convinced my Blessing of the Hands would have trumped even the American Indian's prayers.

The wedding ceremony itself turned out to be the highlight of my trip. I reveled in its multiculturalism, and some of the diverse clergymen's

words truly moved me. Unfortunately, the wedding reception brought me back to the disappointment of the rest of my stay at the ashram. The wedding cake was made of some kind of carob, a poor chocolate substitute. My mother had tried out carob on us during the naturalist movement of the early '70s. It did not go over well. Even Mikey from the Life cereal commercial would not have liked carob. It tasted a little, if anything, like chocolate. I tried a bite of the wedding cake, but it was simply inedible. So much for some dessert to accompany my basmati rice.

The company at the reception was little better than the food. They were talking yoga and I was thinking about more earthly pursuits, like eating. So I just sort of milled about trying to find something to do – or anything even remotely edible.

Fortunately, it was close enough to flight time for me to make a graceful exit from the reception and the ashram. I said my goodbyes to my sister and my new minted brother-in-law, to my parents, and to the dreadful ashram.

One did not exactly hail a skiff at the ashram, so I had to wait until Captain Bellhop was good and ready to go at his leisure. He addressed me as a “Bless-ed James,” but I did not feel very bless-ed, except that I was leaving the bless-ed ashram. When the bless-ed skiff arrived at the bless-ed landing, I bid Captain Bellhop adieu without daring to offer him a gratuity again.

Thoroughly exhausted from my ordeal at the ashram, I made my way back via cab to the Paradise Island airport for the puddle jumper to Miami, and then the two-and-a-half-hour flight back home to Chicago, land of deep dish pizza and everything the ashram was not.

During the flight, I had time between bites of the most delicious airplane food of all time to reflect a bit on the ashram.

I really wished (and still wish) I had stayed at The Atlantis, although I wonder whether they would have even let me into the wedding from there. I probably would have had to have kept it a dark secret, lest they cursed me with some ancient Indian spell.

I learned a lot about myself from the ashram, perhaps ironically, since that is probably what one is supposed to do at an ashram. I learned that as cool and liberal as I thought I was, I was probably the most unspiritual and intolerant person there. I learned how addicted I am to my creature comforts. And finally, I learned I loved my sister enough to withstand the slings and arrows of outrageous discomfort.