

Meditation for Millionaires

A Florida real estate developer, a spiritual institution, and a cosmetics company join hands to help the highly privileged discover their higher purpose.

By ANNA DUBROVSKY

On a balmy evening in May, real estate developer Dilip Barot threw a party. The soiree, held on a swath of oceanfront on Florida's Singer Island, drew an unlikely mix. There were socialites and ashramites; financiers and a former monk; the spiritual leader of the Himalayan Institute and a Siberian tiger. Waiters in white *kurtas* served up chardonnay and cubes of *paneer* on cocktail sticks.

The scene was a harbinger of what's to come. Early next year, Barot will break ground on a \$500 million resort where the very rich will do their very best to find the meaning and purpose of life. Four pale towers will rise on this seven-acre parcel. Amrit Resort and Residences will trade in luxury and spirituality, offering valet parking along with Vedic philosophy. It will, according to promotional materials, blend "the inner science of the East with the comforts of the West."

Barot isn't the first entrepreneur to package opulence and enlightenment. Similarly themed destination resorts are a lucrative and growing business, part of a "wellness industry" that will double to \$1 trillion in the United States by 2010, predicts Paul Zane Pilzer, economist and author of *The New Wellness Revolution*. In an age where McDonald's sells apple slices and salads sprinkled with edamame, there's little question about the salability of self-betterment.

What is unique about the Amrit project is the participation of the Himalayan Institute, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains. Founded in 1971, the Institute is highly regarded for its self-transformation programs, spiritual retreats, and humanitarian projects. It offers instruction in yoga, meditation, ayurveda and other Eastern disciplines (and also publishes this magazine). Now, for the first time, it is lending its name to a real estate venture. >>

Inspiring the rich and powerful elite can have a ripple effect on the masses. Captains of industry make first-rate humanitarians.



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“We needed a credible and authentic lifestyle partner, and for that we looked everywhere,” Barot says. The developer’s search ended when he met Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, spiritual head of the Himalayan Institute, at the Miami home of a mutual friend. The Indian-born men share a vision: facilitating the spiritual awakening of Americans who’ve discovered that “having it all” is no guarantee of happiness.

“Philosophically, we are on the same path,” Tigunait says. “I would be quite cautious about associating with other developers.”

Barot peppers conversations with references to Mahatma Gandhi and shares a zip code with Tiger Woods. His motto is “doing good and doing well.” In 1984, a year after moving to the United States from Gujarat, his and Gandhi’s home state, Barot bought a Florida motel with \$8,000 in savings and the backing of two fellow Gujaratis. He let the janitor go and fixed things himself. His wife changed sheets and scrubbed bathrooms. Soon, the modest motel turned a profit.

Within a few years, he’d bought five more. He started buying dilapidated affordable housing complexes across the United States and rehabilitating them to make them profitable. Today, Barot’s empire includes some 7,000 residential units, and he’s developing an IT park called Infocity in Gujarat. Barot says soul-searching and gratitude for this bounty gave birth to Amrit, whose name means “elixir” or “nectar of life” in Sanskrit.

“People need spirituality to appreciate what they’ve got,” he says. “I have seen the pain of people who rub shoulders with presidents. The more you gain, the more you need an understanding of life to enjoy it. Otherwise, you always feel unfulfilled, unsatisfied.”

As an outpost of the Himalayan Institute, Amrit will offer breath training, yoga therapy, nutritional counseling, detoxification programs, and seminars on spirituality. The resort will also boast a full-service spa operated by Aveda Corp.,

Anna Dubrovsky, former editor and reporter at Bloomberg News, is a Yoga+ contributing editor. She spent the last year in Chennai, India.

the maker of plant-based beauty products. Now owned by Estee Lauder Cos., Aveda was started in 1978 by Horst Rechelbacher, a student of the Himalayan Institute’s late founder, Swami Rama.

PERSONALIZED LUXURY

As they seek health, happiness, and a higher purpose, Amrit residents and guests will enjoy five-star service and what Barot calls “personalized luxury.” Staff will greet them by name. Bouquets of their favorite flowers will grace their bed stands. Individual tastes will govern everything from the color of bed linens to the content of fridges, Barot promises. He likes to make the point that he prefers room-temperature drinking water. Most exclusive establishments serve up standardized luxury: ice-cold water.

Barot and Tigunait maintain that the spiritual quest, though often associated with asceticism, can dovetail with a life of luxury. “At this moment, it’s not practical to expect that someone will try to find inner peace while renouncing physical comforts,” Tigunait says. “Constantly living with discomfort, constantly living with shortage, cannot lead us anywhere. The Himalayan Institute, in collaboration with Amrit and Aveda, is setting an example that by using worldly means and tools, a human being can lead a happier and healthier life.”

Moreover, Tigunait believes that inspiring the elite can have a ripple effect on the masses. Captains of industry make first-rate humanitarians. Having discovered a sense of community and purpose at Amrit, a lumber magnate might commit to planting a million trees. The head of an offshore-drilling company might invest in renewable energy. A pharmaceuticals executive might build a hospital in Haiti.

“Luxury can be a source of happiness only when you begin to share a tiny bit of your prosperity, a tiny bit of your achievement, with those less fortunate. Only then will your soul respect you,” he says. “What we are trying to do is inspire people to be useful to themselves and the people around them.”

Barot concurs: “If we can win the >>

hearts of the rich and help them understand the position of the poor, the world will be a better place.”

To market Amrit’s luxury-weds-spirituality concept, Barot hired Playground Destination Properties Inc., which specializes in selling resort real estate. The sales team, led by former golf pro Pat Cerjan, works out of a makeshift office

PUTTING THE ASHRAM IN AMRIT

At first, Dr. Carrie Demers, medical director of the Himalayan Institute’s Center for Health and Healing, didn’t feel comfortable, either. She has lived and worked at the Institute for 12 years, earning a small stipend. Volunteers, along with a cadre of long-term residents, do much of the work on the Institute’s cam-

time insomniac learned a breathing technique that puts him to sleep.

“They got it,” Demers says. “They understood what we do.”

Infusing Amrit with ashram culture will be Barot’s challenge. It remains to be seen whether private butlers, Pilates instructors, cosmetologists and cocktail servers can replicate the sense of commu-

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on the Singer Island property. Its walls are plastered with talking points and buzzwords: “wellness lifestyle,” “infinite pleasure,” and “refreshing ambiance.”

Playground prides itself on “great storytelling”—selling a vision rather than square footage. Ask Cerjan how much an Amrit condominium or villa will cost, and he’ll tell you it’s an investment in inner harmony. That’s partly because Barot’s business model is less concrete than his concept. It remains to be determined how many units will be sold and how much they’ll go for, though figures like \$1.1 million and \$5 million have found their way into print. Architects are still revising blueprints. The project is more than two years from completion.

Some potential buyers, like Florida nutraceuticals executive Jill Healy, find the vagueness frustrating. “I love the concept,” she says. “I would love to be involved. But I don’t feel comfortable right now.”

pus in Honesdale, Pa. When Tigunait told Demers about partnering with high rollers in Palm Beach County, she had her doubts.

“I thought, why am I involved in this high-end moneymaking thing? I’m an ashramite!” she says, sitting in a conference room at Amrit headquarters. “But then I realized it’s a win-win situation. We can help these people who are wealthy and powerful to be healthier and happier. Then they will be able to think about what impact they want to have in the world. Those people benefit. Amrit benefits. The world benefits. Even though I’m out of my element here, it still feels good.”

It helped that Cerjan and his sales team flew north in November to spend several days at the Institute—listening, learning, and unwinding. Cerjan, who arrived in jeans and cowboy boots, bought stretchy pants to sample yoga. The long-

nity that is a hallmark of the Himalayan Institute.

“My hunch is there’ll be a different quality to the treatments here because they won’t be performed by ashramites,” Demers says. “There’s a real spiritual purity at the Institute. Though, with the right training, the staff here can also develop a sense of selfless service.”

What is certain is that an address in the Palm Beaches will help the Himalayan Institute reach more people—particularly aging baby boomers. Having spent their youths pursuing physical, intellectual, professional, and financial goals, “they have come to the realization that what they have achieved has not made them happy,” Tigunait says. The trappings of retirement—sunny clime, big-screen TV, golf club membership—can’t alleviate their loneliness and despair.

“They are in need of a teacher,” he says. “We are in need of students.” +

LUXURY WEDS SPIRITUALITY *Amrit’s residents and guests will enjoy five-star services as they strive for inner harmony in the Palm Beaches.*



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