

TEMPLE OF ME

MEXICO'S FUTURE-FACING SHA WELLNESS
CLINIC OFFERS THE GIFT OF SELF-CARE

BY JESSE ASHLOCK. PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAUREEN M EVANS

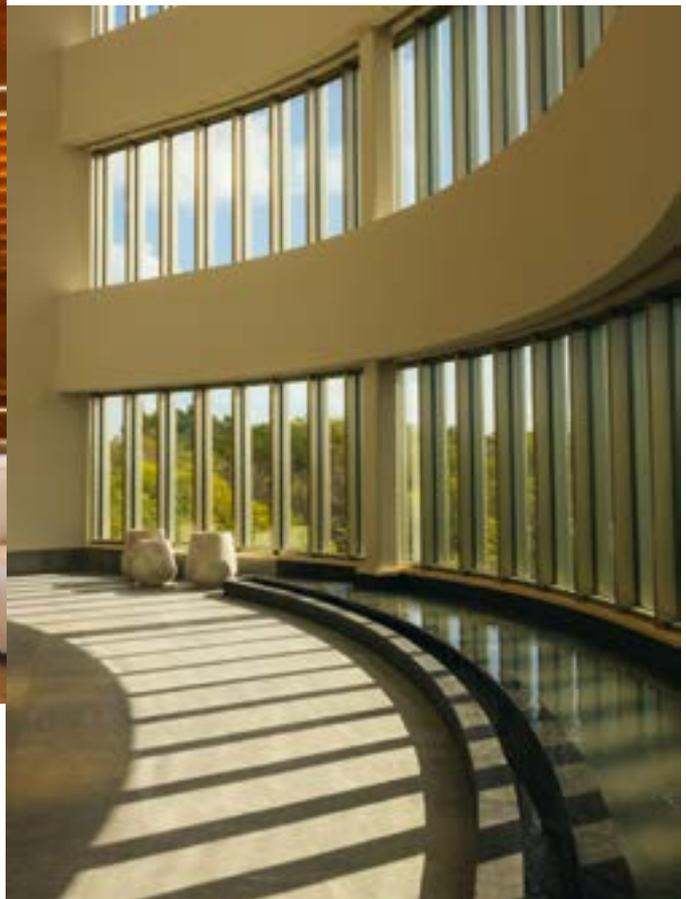
THE PRISTINE WHITE STRUCTURE of Sha Wellness Clinic Mexico rises daringly from tropical rainforest near the Riviera Maya. It looks, at first glance, like a classic ocean liner, but with a touch of tropical modernism and some futuristic curves. Those twists and swoops, inspired by the human genome, dazzle even more inside, but their balletic energy never detracts from Sha's mission: to marry healthy nutrition, traditional natural therapies and Western medicine, to help you let go, recharge and return home with real-life tools to be happier and more successful.

Sha is a family business, and its creation is a family story. After being diagnosed with colon cancer, Alfredo Bataller Parietti, a Spanish developer, consulted a doctor who prescribed a strict macrobiotic ➤



Oceanfront terrace
at Sha Wellness
Clinic Mexico

HEALTH FIX



Clockwise from right: macrobiotic food at Shamadi restaurant; hydrotherapy circuit; welcome lounge; sunny corridor



diet. Miraculously, he went into remission. Later, the same doctor cured the youngest of his three sons, Alejandro Bataller, of persistent migraines. The family opened the original Sha Wellness Clinic in Alicante on Spain's Costa Blanca, where they'd long had a holiday home, out of a desire to share with others what they'd come to learn about nutrition and wellness. This was in October 2008, at the height of the financial crash. "I think we had one guest in our first week," Alejandro told me.

A little more than a decade later, having weathered that storm and surfed the cresting wave of wellness travel, the family was preparing to buy land in Palm Beach, Florida, for a Stateside expansion: somewhere to airlift the regulars and tap into the American and Latin American markets. But the sale fell through at the last minute so, impulsively, Alfredo and his older son, also Alfredo, decided to take a trip to the first place they could get a flight to from Miami: Cancún, near the Riviera Maya, which they'd never visited before. "Maybe this is the place," the younger Alfredo told his father. "Look at the nature. The Mexican hospitality." The land they ultimately chose sits on a picturesque stretch of Costa Mujeres, looking across electric blue waters to Isla Mujeres. Kayaks and snorkelling gear sit at the ready.

I showed up at this tranquil sanctuary of 101 suites in an unusually ready state to receive all it had to offer. I'd separated from my wife months earlier, and my unsettled new circumstances had percolated into every aspect of my existence: sleep, diet, exercise, mindset. "Your chi is low," Philippa Harvey, an experienced integrative health practitioner, told me on my first day, in a Traditional Chinese Medicine palm diagnosis. We were sitting in a minimalist office that looked out onto a thicket of palms. "You're running on reserves." She could see sadness in my lungs and anger in my liver. "Every organ is connected to an emotion and every emotion is connected to an organ, and we don't know which comes first," she explained. "It's chicken and egg." ➤



“IMAGINE THAT YOU ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT BEING IN THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE,” SAID THE YOGA TEACHER. THOSE WERE THE WORDS I NEEDED TO HEAR

From left: Harmony Lounge at Sha Wellness Clinic Mexico; the newly opened retreat looks out to Isla Mujeres

Harvey compared Sha’s staff to workers in a garage, with specialists who look after the chassis and body, the engine and the electrical system, all in dialogue. She was an electrician, she explained. Over the next few days I would meet many other mechanics for consultations and assessments: on my diet, my skin, my mental state and my cognitive ability. Others offered more ancient therapies, such as acupuncture or shiatsu, as well as newfangled treatments. My lower back had been killing me for weeks, part of my overall disordered state, so I underwent cellular regeneration therapy, which uses cold atmospheric plasma technology to reduce oxidative stress, while I watched kitesurfers cavort on the Bahía de Mujeres. I also tried pressotherapy, getting into a partial Michelin Man suit that squeezed my legs to promote lymphatic drainage. I gamely rode a couple of machines from the VR fitness company Icaros, including one in which I strapped on a headset and used my core to navigate a virtual spacecraft through rings of fire.

But the cornerstone of the experience was nutrition. My plan called for a lot of wholegrains, vegetables in a multitude of colours and plenty of protein, with a probiotic side dish such as sauerkraut. Breakfasts always included miso soup, which Sha is religious about, for its probiotic and antioxidant properties. I realised that when I have travelled to places where miso soup is available for breakfast, such as Asia or Hawaii, I have preferred it – so what was I doing eating toast, cereal and eggs at home? I learnt how to make it myself at a healthy cooking class with chef Lixi Lineas, along with delicious muffins I never would have believed were gluten- and sugar-free. Each evening I wallowed in the hot tub on the balcony of my spacious, minimalist and ascetic suite with its views of the Bahía de Mujeres, feeling balanced and calm (if perhaps a little hungry).

My last morning at Sha made me feel particularly great. This was partly because of the last treatment, an ice bath that I stayed in for 10 minutes. The process is proven to reduce inflammation and provide

all sorts of immunological benefits, but just as important to me was the confidence it gave me in my ability to master my body, especially after I began trembling about halfway through and was able to use some of the breathing techniques I’d learnt to calm myself down. Before that, I had a one-on-one yoga session with Monserrat Amaro, one of several therapists I felt strongly connected to, who’d previously led me in a sound bath with Tibetan singing bowls. As we went through the poses, I mused on the feeling of calm, vibrant aliveness you derive from getting into a great flow. The palm trees were whipped by a tropical breeze as Amaro adjusted my posture. “Imagine that you are the most important being in the entire universe,” she murmured. At that moment, those were the words I needed to hear. If you think of yourself as important, you’ll take good care of yourself. It’s something too easy to forget.

I know that the eternal question with places such as Sha is how much of what you practise stays with you when you go home. So far, I’ve followed the recipe I learnt in the cooking class to make batches of miso soup for breakfast. I decided to get more serious about my skin-care regime and have found that following it religiously morning and evening is a way to practise mindfulness and to be alive and aware in the moment. That’s the bigger thing. I returned home resolved to approach the little decisions I make each day – about what I eat and drink, when I sleep and exercise, how I interact with friends and family – with greater intention and purpose. To live my life, rather than letting it live me. That sounds like it could be a Matthew McConaughey meme, but I don’t really care. All I care about is remembering that, for myself, I need to be the most important being in the universe. 🧘

Healing Holidays offers a seven-night Rebalance and Energise programme at Sha Wellness Clinic Mexico from £5,439 per person, including transfers, full board and treatments; healingholidays.com.

Sha Wellness Clinic Mexico is one of the hotels on this year’s Hot List. To read the entry and view the full line-up, visit cntraveller.com