

A-LIST

STYLE

TRAVEL

CULTURE

ON TRAVEL

Reach for the Spas

A who's-who of where to be well.

CHIVA-SOM, THAILAND

Down on the coast of Hua Hin, south of Bangkok, Chiva-Som is more a religion than a hotel. It was a game-changer when it opened more than 20 years ago, and is still the place to which many turn for ultimate relaxation and specialist care.

Guests come for who they know—doctors, therapists, physios, trainers and nutritionists—as much as visiting consultants, such as Danchai Chernprateep on meditation and acupuncturist Takeshi Kitagawa. The offerings are broad: from quantum therapeutics to cranio-myofascial release to structural alignment to chi nei tsang, the strange and powerful deep massage of the abdomen embedded in Taoist philosophy. Yet it doesn't have to be medical, or spiritual in fact. Chiva-Som can also serve as a sweat-it-out fitness boot camp, too—with reformer Pilates, sprints on the beach and Muay Thai training.



CHIVA-SOM, THAILAND

Down on the coast of Hua Hin, south of Bangkok, Chiva-Som is more a religion than a hotel. It was a game-changer when it opened more than 20 years ago, and is still the place to which many turn for ultimate relaxation and specialist care.

Guests come for who they know—doctors, therapists, physios, trainers and nutritionists—as much as visiting consultants, such as Danchai Chernprateep on meditation and acupuncturist Takeshi Kitagawa. The offerings are broad: from quantum therapeutics to cranio-myofascial release to structural alignment to chi nei tsang, the strange and powerful deep massage of the abdomen embedded in Taoist philosophy. Yet it doesn't have to be medical, or spiritual in fact. Chiva-Som can also serve as a sweat-it-out fitness boot camp, too—with reformer Pilates, sprints on the beach and Muay Thai training.

Regulars might not want them to change a thing but they've just undertaken a revamp: an uplifting makeover by Ed Tuttle's Designrealization practice (Amanjiwo, Le Mélézin, Park Hyatt Paris-Vendôme), which has raised the ceilings, lightened the rooms with pale hardwood furnishings and blond bamboo walls, and added in soft Jim Thompson silks, Thai ceramics and Laotian drum tables. It's better than ever.

A seven-night full-board stay from £4,638 per person sharing. Price includes flights, transfers and daily credit towards spa treatments.

VILLA STÉPHANIE, BRENNERS PARK-HOTEL & SPA, GERMANY

In the historic spa town of Baden-Baden, on the fringes of the Black Forest, this is arguably the current world leader when it comes to integrating orthodox medicine with holistic healing, from preventive to palliative.

Located beside the beautiful parkland of Lichtentaler Allee, the atmosphere is cultured, refined and wholly European. Haus Julius, which adjoins the 15-room hotel, Villa Stéphanie, offers the gamut of full medical care with a top-notch team of pros headed by Dr Harry König. "There is nothing we cannot do," he says, referring to their cutting-edge diagnostic techniques. There's a lab on site, a specialist ophthalmology unit and an institute for preventive medicine. "We aim to help you live the healthiest life you can."

It's a strong yet simple message, focusing on nutrition, exercise and relaxation. The rigorous detox, in particular, is full-on, and there's a digital detox available too—with a button by the bed to disconnect the room from the grid and wifi. On departure, the after-care is outstanding with phone numbers and personal email addresses of a team who truly want you to continue the good habits. This is primarily about fixing the body, rather than the head, although who truly separates the two nowadays?

A seven-night full-board stay with a detox programme from £3,940 per person sharing. Price includes flights, transfers, nutritional plan and treatments.

COMO SHAMBHALA ESTATE, INDONESIA

Bali beautiful. This place is positively Edenic with its lush gardens, waterfalls, frog-filled ponds and birdsong, mossy trails to springwater pools hewn into natural rock and wide vistas of the Ayung Valley, near Ubud.

There's more: a handful of very special therapists, such as Nancy Kim, who focuses on pain relief and women's health but is also a sensational soft-touch acupuncturist, and Amy Buck, the radiant Pilates instructor who'll sort out postural alignment—and is as stellar in situ as she is for after-care (she doesn't quite nag, but she definitely checks in even after you've left the resort). And I would fly halfway around the world for Kimiko Briody, who specializes in healing the mind and body through massage and meridian points—and perhaps a sprinkling of fairy dust, as there can be no other explanation for her cathartic powers. (She's on leave at present but the best thing the resort could do would be to get her back quick-smart.) Meantime, there are various drop-in activities across the resort—from flow yoga to Balinese dance, rock climbing to walks in the rice fields. The food—organic, locally sourced, often raw—is exceptional. It feels like a proper holiday, one that just happens to make you feel in fine fettle, too.

A seven-night stay including breakfast from £2,483 per person sharing. Price includes flights, transfers, some facilities and services.

VANA, INDIA

Tucked away in the foothills of the Himalayas, Vana lies between the home of the exiled Dalai Lama, some of India's important Hindu pilgrimage sites, and the sacred Ganges River. It is a spiritual retreat, more about the mind than any other matter.

On arrival, the architecture astounds: the main hall, with its uplifting vaulted ceilings, feels more like an award-winning concert venue than a lobby with glorious gigantic mobiles suspended from the ceiling. Without even entering a treatment room, these vast spaces filled with conceptual art feel transformative. In the grounds, there are gardens of magnolia and frangipani, orchards of mango and lychee.

Days are extraordinarily calm. There's gom meditation in the Tibetan Centre, the languorous movements of Ai Chi in the pool and sound therapy with a traditional flautist under a metallic sculpture of a Bodhi tree. Doctors make a plan but there is no disapproval if you, say, switch a manual lymphatic drainage for a manicure, or if you become hooked on a therapist such as Ngawang, whose expertise is Kunye, a skin-nourishing treatment that begins with ethereal Tibetan chanting. The Buddhist experiences are peerless; come here to try to achieve a higher state of being.

A seven-night full-board stay from £2,447 including flights, transfers and a tailor-made treatment programme.

Healing Holidays (healingholidays.co.uk) can organize stays at all four properties