



Som kind of wonderful?

Thailand's multi-award-winning Chiva-Som spa is about to reopen its doors after a six-month refurb. **Gillian de Bono** tests its prowess on a personalised programme that proves revelatory

Chiva-Som has been on my radar for almost as long as the 20 years I have been editing *How To Spend It*. From its earliest days – it opened in Hua Hin, 200km south of Bangkok, in 1995 – it has had a formidable reputation, and garnered a host of awards, as a destination spa where those seeking to improve their physical, emotional or spiritual wellbeing are guaranteed results without sacrificing the luxury tropes of a world-class holiday resort: serene surroundings (17 Thai Pavilion Rooms set among banyan trees, waterfalls and lotus ponds, plus 54 Ed Tuttle-designed rooms and suites); saintly but delectable cuisine; exceptional levels of service; exemplary eco credentials – and a pool with steps leading onto a fine sand beach as long as the eye can see.

There are 12 programmes, from stress management and optimal fitness to migraine relief and sustainable weight loss, and guests can combine their choice with any number of virtuous classes, therapies and consultations, or opt for sybaritic treatments (perhaps a Siam Ritual Cocoon or Rejuvenating Facial), poolside relaxation and excursions to Hua Hin's lively night markets.

Krip Rojanastien, Chiva-Som's chairman, told me that more than half of his guests come to lose weight and detox, and it is easy to see why. The beautifully presented, calorie-counted dishes may be small in size but they are big on flavour and nutrition, leaving little sense of deprivation – and few hunger pangs. One evening I enjoyed sashimi and rice-free nori rolls, followed by pumpkin soup with crab, chilli and hot basil foam, dukkah-spiced lamb

rack with spiced lentil purée, and high-protein chocolate ice cream, for just 384 calories. One guest stayed a record nine months and lost 60kg, while a whisky-loving business magnate lost 46kg over successive stays, despite his regular postprandial partying in Hua Hin's livelier bars.

Chiva-Som's track record for breaking bad habits – whether unhealthy eating, a sedentary or workaholic lifestyle or a neglect of chronic health problems – is ironic when one considers that, for many of its well-heeled clients, repeat visits have become something of an addiction. One British guest has returned 90 times; others a "mere" 35 or 40 times. Were my own circumstances different, I would happily book myself in twice yearly.

With more than 200 treatments, plus visiting consultants, Chiva-Som's offerings go well beyond those expected of a destination spa. As a registered hospital, it also offers programmes for specific illnesses and rehabilitations. During my stay, I met a businesswoman in her 30s who had booked in to find better ways to manage her rheumatoid arthritis.

My initial consultation reviewed my own medical history and set my goals. As a baby boomer, I said I wanted to optimise the quality of my life in my later years – to feel and look the best I can for my age. A big ask, I know, for a seven-day retreat. But at a facility considered one of the very best in the world (where a seven-night retreat programme costs upwards of £4,800), such asks come with the territory.

First up was a consultation with US-trained naturopath Dr Jason Culp. After discussing my lifestyle and current state of health, he tested

Main picture: a new Thai Pavilion Suite at Chiva-Som. Above: Paul Emery performing his Quantum Emotional Physical Release therapy





Clockwise from left: chair-based Gyrokinesis exercises are aimed at relaxing tight joints and strengthening muscles. Abdominal massage Chi Nei Tsang seeks to release blocked energy from organs. The Heartmath Inner Balance app monitors coherence between breathing and heart rate

He equated my shallow "chest" breathing to driving a car with your foot down but the brakes on

my stress levels by monitoring how my breathing affected my heart rate. Coherence between the two would be a sign that I was managing stress well; poor coherence would signal the opposite. It turned out I had shallow breathing with periodic pauses – a low-coherence, high-stress reading. As chronic stress is known to increase the risk of a wide range of health problems – from high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and diabetes to insomnia, depression and a weakened immune system – it became clear that stress management needed to be one of my top priorities.

The test was repeated, but this time I was asked to breathe in deeply, starting from my abdomen, for five seconds, and out for five seconds, using as fluid a rhythm as possible. My coherence improved to a zen-like 100 per cent. Now I just have to train myself to breathe deeply and rhythmically in everyday life – but Dr Culp reckoned 10 minutes of coherence breathing three times a day for four to six weeks would take care of this. He also recommended downloading the Heartmath Inner Balance app (pictured right) so that I can monitor my progress.

Next came a kinesthetic assessment of my posture, flexibility, stability, coordination and muscular tone and performance. The process involved being photographed from all sides and placing grids over the images to detect irregularities – and oh, what a long list this produced. The upshot was that I needed to reduce muscle tightness or strengthen muscle weakness over a large proportion of my body, and in particular in my neck and shoulders, where, I am told, I have Upper Crossed Syndrome – overlapping overactive and underactive muscle groups that cause me to slouch, which is not only visibly ageing but will be contributing to the stiffness and aches I feel in my back and neck. Decades of working hunched over a computer is a likely cause. Reader, you have been warned.

The next day I had a one-on-one introduction to Gyrokinesis (pictured above), a hybrid exercise system using rhythmic spiralling and undulating movements that relax tight muscles and stiff joints and also strengthen muscles. The whole body gets a workout, but the big wins for me are increased spinal strength and mobility and improved posture. At a further one-on-one class, I practised a set of exercises I can do at home.

Day two kicked off with a fitness and body-composition assessment. A one-mile brisk walk on

a treadmill established that I had good cardiorespiratory endurance, while crunch and push-up tests both showed good results for my upper-body strength. But I was off the scale, in a bad way, when it came to lower-back flexibility, which increased my risk of pain and injury in that area. As someone who has never been able to bend down and touch my toes with straight legs, this wasn't entirely news to me. But seeing a score of three, when the average for my age group is 27-30, really brought it home – and concentrated my mind on improving my spinal mobility.

Body composition – the weight and distribution of fat and muscle – is another key health metric. Standing on a Tanita monitor for 30 seconds produced over 20 measurements. Overall the results were good. I was particularly chuffed to learn that my estimated metabolic

(physiological) age was 16 years younger than my chronological age; and just as pleased to learn that I had low visceral fat – the abdominal sort that accumulates around the organs isn't always visible and could indicate an increased risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer and Alzheimer's. But other results had me rethinking my approach to diet and exercise. I had always considered myself a kilo or two overweight and assumed I needed to shift fat. The results showed a rather different picture: both my weight and my fat mass were actually low for my frame. If I felt the need to streamline my body, I should be building muscle rather than doing fat-burning exercise or watching my calorie intake.

The second assessment of the day was with Dr Chawapon Kidhirunkul, who gave me further naturopathic feedback in terms of stress management, explaining how our breathing patterns are a reflection of muscle memory, and that breathing that has low coherence can become ingrained after negative experiences. Shallow "chest" breathing and pauses in inhalation show built-in anxiety; uneven exhalations can indicate grief and sadness. He equated it to driving a car with your foot down but the brakes on. Shallow breathing is very common, but simply by retraining our breath, we can increase stress resilience while also protecting our heart, immune system, memory and other cognitive functions.

My next revelation came from visiting practitioner Paul Emery, who specialises in a hybrid therapy called Quantum Emotional Physical Release (pictured on



I woke with a sense of disbelief: the early-morning numbness in my arms and hands that had troubled me for years had gone

opening pages). Paul introduced me to Havening, a healing technique that involves recalling and then displacing an upsetting feeling or memory using visualisation, counting, humming, eye movements and calming strokes of the upper arms, palms and face. The idea is that, with repeated sessions, we can become desensitised to the anxiety, trauma or fear that is distressing us. It's a therapy

that may be too hippy-dippy for some, but if it proves helpful – and it did for me – it can, very usefully, be self-administered. (Paul is available for Skype consultations on info@quantumeptr.com.)

My other treatments included craniosacral therapy, where gentle touch to the skull, neck and spine is used to release restrictions in the central nervous system, and Chi Nei Tsang (pictured on previous page), an

abdominal massage designed to rid organs of stress-related energy blockages. In between, I filled my days with optional classes, from early-morning stretching in an open-air pavilion to aqua aerobics with a buoy and – my favourite – power drumming (beating a large drum while doing aerobic exercise, which is great for balance and coordination) and meditative walks along the shallows of the pristine beach.

Clockwise from top: the pool at Chiva-Som with its sea view. Tastes of Chiva Som: tom yam heang (prawn noodle soup), nam tok pla (fish salad) and pears and prunes poached in jasmine tea. South Indian Pampering, one of 200 treatments at the resort

And then there were the daily massages. I lucked out on my first day when I was allocated Aoonny, a pint-sized powerhouse who focused on my upper back and neck using a combination of techniques. I asked her to administer whatever pressure was necessary and, for the next 50 minutes, I groaned inwardly, and occasionally outwardly, as she dug doggedly into the knots, kneading and pummeling them into submission. When, on my penultimate day, Aoonny said, "Tomorrow I give you strong massage," my heart sank; surely she was already dialled up to max? True enough, this last massage did, on occasion, bring silent tears to my eyes, but I woke up the next day with a sense of disbelief: the early-morning numbness and tingling in my arms and hands that had troubled me for years, and for which I had received treatment from a medical consultant, osteopath and specialist physiotherapists, had gone.

On this happy note, I left Chiva-Som with a far greater understanding of my health strengths and weaknesses, and how I can best optimise the limited time I have available to achieve improvements where I will feel – and see – the most benefit. Best of all, the techniques I learnt can be built into my everyday life without formal classes or gym membership. I can even watch my favourite television series while doing my chair-based Gyrokinesis exercises.

Since my visit, Chiva-Som has been closed for six months for refurbishment.



The good news is that all those repeat guests suffering withdrawal symptoms can get their next fix in a matter of days; it reopens on November 1, refreshed and revitalised, just as one would expect. +

SOM LIKE IT HOT

Gillian de Bono travelled as a guest of **Healing Holidays** (020-7529 8560), which can arrange a seven-night retreat from £5,595 per person sharing, including flights, transfers, full-board accommodation in an Ocean Room, treatments in the chosen retreat, a daily massage and access to a daily schedule of activities. For details of additional inclusions exclusively for readers of the *Financial Times*, visit healingholidays.co.uk/chiva-som, **Chiva-Som**, 73/4 Petchkasem Road, Hua Hin, Prachuap Khiri Khan 77110, Thailand (+6632-536 536; chivasom.com).

