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WELLNESS HOLIDAYS

Just another day in Ayurvedic paradise

*Fiona Duncan visits
a Thai resort combining
deep spirituality with
the trappings of luxury*

Now, this is a first. Wellness holidays have until now eluded me. More than eluded: they simply haven't been on my wish list. Of course the occasional

massage in a hotel spa has been a treat, but lovely though they feel at the time, the effects have been transitory.

With one exception. "Is it Ayurvedic?" my long-suffering husband always asks, when I tell him a treatment is in the offing. This is because I once had a consultation and chakra balancing at the hands of a top practitioner of Ayurvedic medicine and my husband swears that I was bearable for a full three weeks afterwards. Not just bearable, but really quite nice.

Last June, I was the beneficiary of another amazing Ayurvedic massage from Sheena, a therapist at Kamalaya, the wellness sanctuary and holistic spa on Koh Samui in Thailand. Along with John and Karina Stewart, founders of Kamalaya, and a few of her colleagues, she had come to Lime Wood in the New Forest for a week's residency in the hotel's Herb House Spa.

Kamalaya lite, you might call it. The massage, smoothing out my knotted muscles, was followed by a yoga session during which I was able to arrange my limbs in ways that would have been quite impossible before. Another half-hour of stress-busting pranayama breathing with Sujay, one of Kamalaya's meditation and life enhancement mentors, and I went home agile, uplifted and at ease.

I was hooked, and so was the husband. But it would be a whole year until the Kamalaya therapists returned



to Lime Wood. "Could you go to Thailand?" he asked, pleadingly.

Kamalaya, in Koh Samui, flows down a steep jungly hillside to a curved beach on a sweeping southern bay. Rooms and villas are secreted among the banana trees, casuarinas, bougainvillea and frangipani, with trees and boulders incorporated into the architecture (the work of artist Robert Powell). The airy Wellness Centre, two restaurants, lounge, library, leisure pools, 80ft lap pool and buildings for yoga, meditation and music, fitness centre, steam and sauna, are hardly visible. Shady, dark wood bedrooms, either in five small purpose-built blocks or individual villas, feel older than their years decoratively, especially the most recent hilltop Superior Suites, but they suitably avoid ostentation, blend with their surroundings and are immaculately kept, many with wonderful views. Staying in a Beach Front Villa, as my friend, Tiggy, and I did, meant the delight of pottering straight into the (shallow) sea for an early morning dip. As for the thigh-burning uphill walk to the main resort (buggies are available), it gets easier as

the week progresses and makes a good antidote to all the pampering.

There aren't many better things in life than old friends. Tiggy and I go back nearly half a century. We've laughed our way through most of that span, and when fate has punched its blows, we've been there for each other. We're still laughing, but we have our scars and our burdens - who doesn't?

Time, then, for some healing in paradise. You can treat Kamalaya like a hotel, making use of the complimentary facilities and activities and booking treatments "à la carte", or you can choose one of the programmes designed by Karina that cover fitness, detox and diet, healthy lifestyle, stress, yoga and emotional balance. As well as these timetable activities, guests can slot in the free holistic activities on offer throughout the day, from qi gong to salsa dancing plus plenty of yoga, pilates, pranayama breathing and meditation, all superbly taught.

The programme that both Tiggy and I chose focused on our emotions and aimed to balance mind, heart and body. At the core of Embracing Change are several one-to-one sessions with one of Kamalaya's four mentors, Sujay, Smitha, Rajesh and River. All of them have previously led monastic lives, three in the same ashram in India, one as a monk in Thailand. My mentor was Sujay, whom I had met at Lime Wood. He is a true healer and the profound impact of his intuition and personal guidance was something I could only have imagined finding in an ashram, not on a holiday. No treatment could come close to the lasting quality of his wisdom. He did me a power of good.

If Kamalaya embodies the spirituality of an Indian ashram wrapped in the trappings of a luxury tropical resort, that's because of the people behind it. John Stewart is Canadian, a natural entrepreneur who happens also to be a "traveller and a seeker". He spent 16 years, from the age of 23, devoted to a life of service and spiritual studies in a Himalayan ashram. Karina, half-Mexican, half-Texan, came to his ashram; he knew when he first saw her that he would marry her and a decade later, he found her again and did just that. Karina, alumnus of Princeton, is a master of traditional Chinese medicine and a lifelong practitioner of natural healing and yoga. "Right from the start," John told me, "we decided to intertwine my knowledge of meditation and Karina's understanding of health in an environment where people could benefit from both".

They settled in Kathmandu, but when John became seriously ill with a liver disease, they moved to Koh Samui to have access to a particular herb that grew there. As he recovered, he was shown an ancient cave used by

HANDS-ON IN HEAVEN

A massage treatment at Kamalaya, above, where resort facilities nestle in the jungle, main

It's a place where all the guests are seeking some sort of change, which is a great leveller



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Buddhist monks for 300 years. The mystical cave and its shrine forms the beating heart of Kamalaya; having managed to buy the land, John and Karina built the treatment rooms and accommodation around it. Now they would like to spread Kamalaya's ethos and spirit further; a growing collection of videos already help.

Our days passed in a blur of acupuncture and heavenly, deeply effective massages using either traditional Chinese or Ayurvedic techniques, all designed to support our mentors in getting our fractured minds and hearts back in sync. There was plenty of time for lolling on the beach and for delicious, unusual menus from award-winning chef Kai Mueller – never have detox, diet and healthy eating dishes tasted so good. There's organic wine if you want it; like most guests, we simply didn't. I was too busy getting fluids inside me; looking at the results of my initial Bioelectrical Impedance Analysis, the naturopath informed me that my body's cells were turning into wrinkled raisins when they were meant to be plump grapes.

Kamalaya is rare for a modern spa

resort: it has timeless character, soul and authenticity. It's also a place where all the guests are seeking some kind of change, which is a great leveller. No one tries to be glam or posing, however successful or well-known, and friendships are made with ease. Half the guests are solo, and the communal table is the animated heart of the restaurant at dinner.

Now I'm home, and putting into practice everything I learned with Sujay, or trying to. My husband is thrilled with the results, but how long will it last? "Can you go to Lime Wood in June," he asks, "and then back to Thailand?"

Healing Holidays (0203 372 6945; healingholidays.co.uk) offers a five-night Embracing Change programme from £2,799pp full-board, including flights, transfers and treatments; a seven-night programme costs £3,759. Two-night Kamalaya Retreats at Lime Wood (02380 287177; limewood.co.uk) take place from June 3-5 and 5-7 and cost from £1,695pp, including meals and treatments.