

LUXURY TRAVEL

Luxury wellness holidays: chill out while you detox in Thailand

A trip to Chiva-Som, the resort that transforms both body and soul

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The pavilions at Chiva-Som
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I confess: I may have sneaked in a cheeky glass or three of vino on my way to the renowned health resort of Chiva-Som in Thailand. It wasn't just that "day before the diet" thing — cram it in now because you'll miss it later — but more to encourage sleep on the 11-hour overnight flight to Bangkok, you understand.

Insomnia — not just on planes — is part of my problem. Comfort eating when I'm tired has become part of a routine, along with a "medicinal" tippie to help me to sleep and ease stress — of which I've had ridiculous amounts over the past year. Add to that a torn tendon and sprained ligament in my elbow keeping me from my usual exercise regime and you'll see why middle-age spread wasn't so much creeping as racing. My muffin top was getting to be more of a muffin high-rise.

Which is why I'm here, in Hua Hin, a three-hour car journey from Bangkok, wondering if a health resort can ever justify a 14-hour journey across several time zones. I'm a little sceptical when the brochure states: "This is your invitation to get the most out of life, to improve your health and sense of wellbeing so you may enjoy life more fully." Really?



The Champaka suite at Chiva-Som

Yet Chiva-Som has built up quite a following since opening in 1995, gaining celebrity followers from Kate Moss and Serena Williams to the Beckhams. The chef Raymond Blanc goes every two years to recharge. He's not the only one: repeat guests are the norm, although perhaps not to the extent of one British gentleman who has clocked up more than 90 visits.

He, along with others, has been denied his fix for six months — the resort was closed until November for refurbishment that has made its public areas more open, more mirrored and more welcoming. Meanwhile, its 17 Thai pavilions have been given a contemporary look, following on from the revamp of its 37 rooms.

The pavilions are certainly swish, spaced out among banyan trees. Outside they resemble traditional Thai houses, while inside an Ed Tuttle redesign has left them looking sleek, modern and more spacious than before, with bamboo sliding doors, teak floors, high ceilings and fabrics in soft greens. The white bathrooms are enormous and the dressing room big enough to accommodate my entire wardrobe several times over.

My pavilion is one of a new category — the Thai pavilion suite, which has its own kitchenette and private room, where I can enjoy meals or just lounge on the cushions and admire the lotus ponds with trickling waterfalls. But there's no time to lounge just now: there's a hefty questionnaire to complete on my health, habits and innermost desires, listing stuff I wouldn't confess to my closest friends.

It's the prelude to a consultation with a health practitioner before an outline for my stay is sketched out. Guests can follow one of 12 retreats, with set therapies and classes catering for everything from yoga or fitness to cranial relief or cancer care. But the most popular by far are the sustainable weight-management and detox programmes, which is what I'm after.

May, the nutritionist, is having none of it, though. "The way to weight loss isn't to detox. I think stress is your major issue. Tackle that and you'll tackle the root of your weight gain," she tells me with a smile, opening her huge tome of treatments at the emotional-wellbeing pages. She's probably right: chronic stress can cause weight gain around the stomach, as well

as insomnia, depression and a weakened immune system, among a whole range of other ailments.

So we compromise on a mixture, with me following anti-stress therapies, but at the same time undertaking a three-day detox. That's part of the joy of Chiva-Som: you may sign up to a particular retreat, but it will be tailor-made and tweaked to suit your needs, leaving you with a timetable geared to getting the best out of your stay.



A meditation session

Before the detox can start I'm whisked off to see Jason Culp, a naturopathic doctor who tells me that Chiva-Som is about sustainable wellness — not necessarily to make people healthy during their stay, but to inspire them to be healthy in life — as he slips a gizmo on my finger to register my heartbeat. He's looking for coherence between my breaths and my heartbeat, but when he turns the computer screen to face me, there's a big fat red showing on his traffic-light system: I am holding my breath every 20 seconds or so as I inhale, a marker of fear or anxiety in a classic fight-or-flight response, while also holding it on the exhalation, demonstrating sadness or grief.

"It's like having the gas pedal and the brake on at the same time," he warns, before teaching me a simple mindful breathing exercise that I can easily do with an app on my phone, taking six slow breaths a minute. When he shows me his computer screen again, my breathing has been translated into lovely deep, smooth arcs, and the traffic light has turned to green. So simple yet so effective — I'm feeling pretty relaxed.

There's more relaxation to be had in the spa, a warren of 70 treatment rooms on two levels with plenty of tinkling water, sauna and steam cabins, as well as a hydrotherapy suite and floatation tank. This whole area will be refurbished during a second closure this summer — no one seems to know how, but I'm sure it will be impressive. For now, though, it's the place where guests wearing dressing gowns float between therapies mapped out in their individual retreats, as well as to the daily massage included in the package.

So, I'm feeling pretty chilled by dinner time, which I spend in the open-air restaurant by the beach. The food is exquisite, served in tiny but nourishing portions. I feast on prawn miso, a green curry and sorbet, which unbelievably total less than 300 calories, washed down with lemongrass tea (there is alcohol if you want after 6pm, but few do), as my last supper before the detox.

I see that this is going to be a digital detox too: smartphones and tablets are banned in public areas, so where I would normally spend a solo dinner catching up on emails, instead I listen to the waves caress the shore as music plays in the background. Bliss.

It's a shame, then, that a headache mars the next day, caused, I suspect, by caffeine withdrawal rather than my day's calories being cut to just over 500. My eight daily mugs of tea are being substituted for various herbal brews, plus a prescribed wheatgrass shot mid-morning and mid-afternoon, with a handful of supplement pills — one of which somewhat alarmingly turns your wee bright yellow.



Twilight by the pool

The food rations aren't too bad, although when a plate of cruciferous veg and detox sauce is put in front of me for lunch in the Emerald Room, its colours supposedly meant to suppress your appetite (there's green everywhere, from lush vegetation to the fabrics in the rooms), my first thought is: "Is that it?" But it's surprising how full you can feel if you chew slowly and properly — simple, but something I'd never done before.

Day two is liquid day, but the headache has gone and the beef-bone broth is surprisingly filling: I'm not hungry. It's helped by an invigorating massage that seems to involve a lot of slapping and pinching, but leaves me feeling, well, invigorated.

As does the chi nei tsang, or stomach massage. If the idea sounds hideous to you, as it did to me, trust me, it's great. The therapist gently massages your internal organs in the abdominal area, where stress, tension and negative emotions apparently accumulate, leaving you feeling pleasantly woozy.

One more day on reduced calories later and I'm free to eat at will, either on the portion-control 1,000kcal-a-day diet or doing it myself — everything is carefully labelled so you know just how many calories you're consuming. Which is surprisingly little, from the two egg white and one egg yolk omelette with chicken for breakfast (108kcal) to lunch of

Singapore-style chilli seafood (119kcal) plus a plate of salad (100kcal) and a dinner of steak and mash (150kcal). Add a side of green veg and that's an extra 59kcal.

I'm interested to hear that the man behind these exquisite small plates, Paisarn, is a classic Escoffier-trained chef who has a master's in food for anti-ageing. "Fifteen years is a long time, and that's how long I've been doing trial and error to use different things to replace the flavour," he says. "At the beginning we failed so many times and had to throw away so much food, but now we know how to play with it. This kind of cooking has always fascinated me.

"I can't think of one diet that fits all people. The diet we try and give people is tailor-made. But you need to exercise too."

There's plenty of scope for that, with a plush new gym accompanying the dance studio, Pilates room and yoga pavilion, as well as free classes from sunrise to sunset. There's something for all abilities: for me, the stretch, meditation, gentle yoga and aqua aerobics (I never did quite make it up for that sunrise t'ai chi), although there are more active high-impact training and boot-camp classes too.

In the evenings there are lectures from visiting practitioners, a handful of whom are present during my stay. So I attend a session on how to do a two-minute massage facelift and another on the benefits of rolfing to align the body.

When Anne Cousin, an integrative vitality practitioner, gives a talk on the body being able to heal itself, I find it a bit too woo-woo for me. But her free Shake it Off class the next day, in which we follow a series of exercises designed to induce a stress-releasing tremor, proves surprisingly effective, leaving me exhausted but happy.

It works for Barbara, 60, from Toronto too. She is on a 21-day visit (nothing compared with one guest, who stayed nine months and lost 60kg) and, like pretty much everyone I meet, has been before. "The first time is very expensive at Chiva-Som," Barbara confides. "That's because it leads to the second, third and fourth times." In fact, Barbara has been coming here for 18 years and credits Chiva-Som for adding ten years to her life.

Many come in private jets — some days there are as many as six at the local airport that have brought guests — and dinner-time conversation can easily turn to the merits of St Barts and Mustique. But the bath robes, gym kits and pyjamas that guests wear during the day are a great leveller (and evening wear is casual). Everyone is super-friendly, keen to swap ailments and therapies, of which Chiva-Som has hundreds to try. When a Swiss gent in the aqua-aerobics class hears me tell the instructor that I have a dodgy elbow, he recounts his experience with the physios, who managed in two sessions to cure a trapped nerve in his elbow that had been causing him excruciating pain for a year.

My elbow is helped considerably by acupuncture from Dr Satoshi Hashimoto — during my session with him I'm able to straighten it without pain. Not only that, but as he investigates my lack of energy he finds blocked kidneys to be a cause, so he proceeds to bleed the corresponding point on my toe using seiketsu-shiraku acupuncture, releasing my stagnant qi.

And so I drift in a befuddled zen-like haze from anti-stress classes and aqua aerobics to steam rooms and massages, reiki and even a private Pilates class as part of my programme. I'm not even tempted to go out of the resort or to walk on the public beach; this is my own little oasis of magic.

Whoever I talk to, whether it's at the sauna or the sunbeds by the pool, agrees that Chiva-Som may be getting increasingly expensive, but that it still has the edge over its competitors.

As Richard from Australia, who comes for pain relief in his hips, says: “The therapists don’t just treat you and move on to the next person, they are happier to follow up than any other health resort I’ve been to. And I love the attention to detail. When I had to move rooms, they didn’t just pack and unpack for me, but laid out my things in the new room exactly where they were in the old one.”

That’s not surprising when you consider that the staff-to-guest ratio is five to one, and there’s an academy in Bangkok to train the small army of therapists. They are all happy to make your stay as memorable as possible. Want some mango or a particular type of fish when it’s not on the menu? No problem. Need your sports kit or swimming costume washed? That’s complimentary and part of the service.

On my last night I throw caution to the wind with a slap-up Thai meal with Barbara and her friend Uta, including pad thai, a hefty fish main, betel nut starter and delicious sorbet — all less than 400 calories. What the hell, I’m celebrating.

I’m now 4kg lighter, but I’ve gained so much more: the tools to navigate my life a bit better, by chewing and breathing properly, taking downtime from technology and making time for myself. They sound simple, but I needed experts to show me the way.

As the car leaves Chiva-Som I reach for my phone, not to check the hundreds of emails waiting for me, but to open the breathe app and spend ten minutes relaxing. And do I indulge in a glass of something with the in-flight meal? I’m not even tempted.

Need to know

Jane Knight was a guest of Chiva-Som and of Healing Holidays (020 7135 2436, healingholidays.co.uk), which has a seven-night retreat from £5,699pp. The price includes flights, transfers, full board, daily group fitness activities, a spa voucher of £120, a daily massage and specific inclusions on the retreat programme.

Jane parked at Heathrow with Holiday Extras (0800 9555989, holidayextras.co.uk) which has meet and greet for eight days from £75