

CHIVA SOM
HUA HIN, THAILAND

IN BRIEF Legendary retreat that's always switching it up a gear

THE LOWDOWN As this Thai transformer celebrates its 20th year, it is still resolutely ahead of the game. Once hooked, guests return year after year for their annual MOT (55 per cent have been before). Each time you visit there are new classes, new visiting experts, new programmes that really do make a difference. The range of treatments is so all-encompassing and the doctors, therapists, fitness instructors and nutritionists so entirely on-the-money that it's easy to forgive the fact that the public beach is a tad disappointing. Both women and men have a good time here, some rooms have just had a revamp and the staff are so sweet and gentle that it is a good place to bolt to if you are travelling solo (there's a communal table should you wish), or feeling wounded. The food is great. Don't expect starvation. You almost feel like you are cheating your way to weight loss with dishes that are low in fat, salt and sugar, but big on flavour and nutrients. Peppered tuna with Thai-herb mushroom salad, steak with chickpeas in a green-curry sauce, poached pears and prunes in jasmine tea – chef Kanyarat Thanomsaeng prides herself on her surprising creations. And then there are the activities, bountiful and all included, and your personal schedule is individually planned after an arrival consultation. Ta'i chi at sunrise is followed by stretching, yoga and aqua aerobics, Pranayama breathing and Thai boxing. Bone-density classes are a new addition, ta'i chi in the pool is another. There are also

high-impact classes and Gravity 500 is an intensive interval training session (you'll sweat buckets) that uses natural body-weight to increase fat burning. New, too, is the Hypoxic Training Chamber, which mimics conditions at 5,000 metres above sea level, increasing the body's ability to burn calories. But beyond all this, at the heart of Chiva, are its deeply intuitive therapists – among the best anywhere. Sandeep Rawat heads the meditation programme and will help even the most cynical reach a meditative state. Satoshi Hashimoto is the most skilled acupuncturist, and Pilates master

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Jinnapat Pannamkrue knows when to push you hard and when a powerful stretch would be more beneficial. Jason Culp, the resident naturopath, has a great ability to read emotions and help you manage stress. There are long acupuncture sessions, healing

massages, craniosacral treatments and reiki. Guest give themselves over completely, then depart feeling leaner and sharper, rested and content. Chiva's reputation wavered a few years ago, a number of regulars defected, but most are back again now. A true testament to its on-going brilliance.

INSIDER TIP Book one of the cheaper ocean-view rooms. It's nice to sit on the balcony, and, more importantly, it'll bring you close to the action.

BOOK IT Healing Holidays (+44 20 7843 3592; www.healingholidays.co.uk/condenast) offers seven nights from £3,199 per person full board, including all activities, an initial wellness consultation, daily spa treatment, British Airways flights and transfers.

