

Not your average spa break — get in shape with a Thai jungle rejuvenation

Welcome to Thanyapura, an Olympic-standard fitness retreat in Phuket



Kamala beach, Phuket, located close to Thanyapura health resortSUPPALAKKLABDEE/GETTY IMAGES

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I have made it through the lines of tyres without tripping up, and managed to scale the wall of ropes without dangling upside down, but can I make it across the rope swing without being dunked? I'm not so sure. More Private Benjamin than Jessica Ennis-Hill, I take a run for it, leap, grab, swing through the air and crash on the other side of the muddy trench — dry and victorious.

This is one part of the exercise programme that has been put together for me at Thanyapura, an Olympic-village-style fitness retreat in the peaceful jungly heart of otherwise hedonistic Phuket.

Thanyapura isn't your typical Thai spa retreat. It has triathlon tracks, indoor and outdoor tennis courts, a Spinning studio, 25m and 50m swimming pools, numerous yoga studios, boxing areas, football and rugby pitches, a fitness centre, alfresco cardio zones and an army-style assault course. It's also where some of the world's top athletes come to train (Maria Sharapova, Chelsea FC and Formula One drivers have stayed), alongside Olympians (Team GB, the French swimming team, the Russian paralympians). There's nowhere else like it in Asia.



I'm here to channel my inner athlete, because you don't have to be training for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics to check in. Thanyapura has a hotel with rooms from £80 a night, which includes access to more than 100 classes a week — everything from energising morning runs and athletic yoga, to more playful Zumba and water aerobics, as well as tough computerised bike training and restorative foam-roller sessions.

It's a mental workout merely reading through the immense class schedule. In addition, guests have access to all of the facilities (sports, as well as saunas, steam rooms, whirlpools and a mind-training centre) — sign up for one of Thanyapura's programmes, and physiotherapy, spa treatments and medical tune-ups could be thrown in too.

This isn't my first time here, I confess. I stayed at Thanyapura four years ago when I was living in Phuket. I had arrived newly divorced, overwrought, overweight and with an unhealthy aversion to exercise.

Weighing in, my body mass index (BMI) revealed that I was basically 29 per cent butter and cream, with a metabolic age a crushing ten years older than my actual age. It was the boot up the flabby back-side I needed. For the next four days I dragged myself to classes, huffed and puffed through each one, and was then surprised — amazed, actually — to find that those "feelgood" endorphins were being released much quicker than I expected. Two months after checking out, I had lost 17lb and made exercise a permanent part of my life.

This time I'm on the Reboot-Regain Fitness and Conditioning programme; other options include Recharge Your Batteries and Destress Your Life. Over the past year my daily yoga exercises have become routine, I'm still anti-cardio and my weight has crept up, so the reboot programme seems like the best fit for me.



Morning yoga at Thanyapura

My first appointment is with nurse Nicole Bravata, from Arizona, who takes a blood sample for analysis (insulin, cholesterol, kidney and liver function, tumour markers, hormones) and scans my palms with a mad-scientist-sounding photospectograph looking for mineral deficiencies or an excess of heavy metals (I'm apparently lacking magnesium, which accounts for the muscle aches I've had).

“We like to think of it more as a medical tune-up,” Bravata tells me. “It’s not always about taking away, it’s also about adding in — a little more exercise there, a few more greens here. Committing to small changes every day is what ultimately makes the big difference.” This makes a lot more sense to me than expecting anyone to make radical overnight changes. Later we’re joined by Craig Burton, an Australian nutritionist, who asks: “What do you enjoy? What are you passionate about?” He understands that there’s no point advising me to go jogging, which I loathe, or to stop eating fruit, which I love. Thanyapura’s goal is to find what fits each individual. That way you’re more likely to continue your routine and keep adding those small but important changes when you get home. “Let’s throw in some resistance and weight training,” he suggests.



The resort is designed with understated Thai styling

Training with weights will increase my heart rate, but also provide the variety I hanker for. When it comes to my diet, what I eat is mostly fine, but when I eat could be better; having a vegetable and protein powder smoothie for breakfast before exercising will help with weight loss. I can keep my fruit, but should have less and eat it with lunch to keep my energy levels high in the afternoon, when I tend to flag and crave a snack. Plus add a few more leafy greens to my evening meal.

From there on in my daily schedule consists of an enjoyable mix of morning meditation, breakfast and some yoga (the bendy-stretchy kind, as well as more vigorous vinyasa flows). Next, I might drop by the medical centre for physiotherapy with Khun Aliporn, a man of big smiles and few words who seems to slip into an almost meditative state as he kneads his way around my left hip and shoulder, smoothing out the kinks and cricks that come from spending half my life bent over a laptop. Another day I'm hooked up to an IV drip for a Myers' cocktail of magnesium, calcium and vitamins B and C; the list of health benefits include relieving migraines, muscle cramps and fatigue. I'm cynical, but have to admit that there's a spring in my step.

I'm soon hooked on my personal-training sessions with Jay Perera, a Sri Lankan fitness and Thai-boxing coach who intuitively knows when to push me to do more TRX reps and when to ease off into big satisfying stretches instead. For core work, there's Stefan Lange, a German coach — and who could know better about the importance of core work than a wheelchair-user, former professional athlete and sports therapist? Thanyapura's sensible approach also applies to food. My schedule leans towards weight loss — green or purple protein smoothies for breakfast; avocado, mango and pomegranate salad for lunch; steamed chicken or fish with vegetables for dinner — but the 13-page menu in the restaurant covers everything from nutritious turmeric sea bass to beef burgers and pasta alfredo.



Tennis is on offer for guests GETTY IMAGES

The rooms, 77 in total, are split between the cheerful pool wing and more monastic garden wing. They are functional rather than fashionable, but Thanyapura knows the importance of a strong shower and comfortable bed.

My final health screening comes on the morning of my last day, and on receiving my printout I have to restrain myself from holding it above my head and lapping the room like a champion. I won't be joining Team GB, but I'm down 5lb in five days, have a metabolic age of 35 (ten years below my real age), BMI in the healthy range, and normal insulin and cortisol (stress) markers, drastically reduced from my visit four years before. And that's a win for me.

NEED TO KNOW

Lee Cobaj was a guest of Thanyapura (thanyapura.com) and Healing Holidays (healingholidays.com), which can arrange a seven-night programme from £2,869pp, including flights, transfers and full-board accommodation