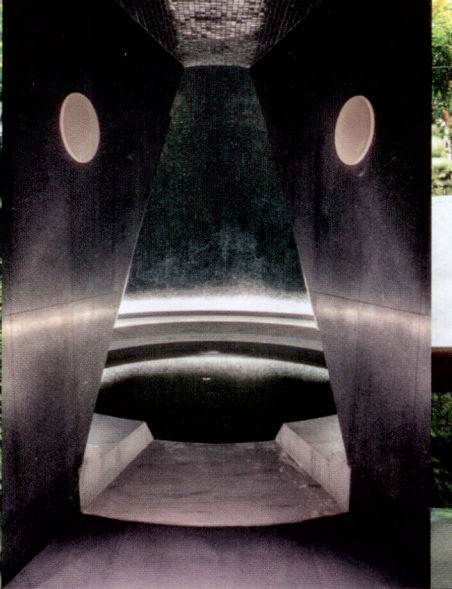
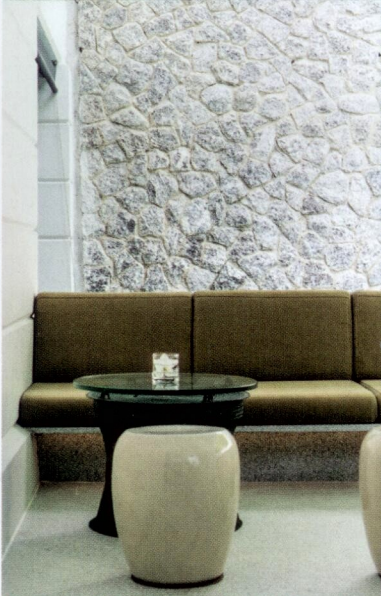


THE MASTER HEALER CHIVA-SOM

SINCE OPENING IN THAILAND 25 YEARS AGO, THE BIG HITTER HAS LED THE WELLNESS PACK AND GAINED A CULT FOLLOWING ALONG THE WAY. FRESH FROM A ROLLING FOUR-YEAR REVAMP, IT'S BETTER THAN EVER. COULD THIS BE THE BEST DESTINATION SPA IN THE WORLD?

BY SUSAN D'ARCY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS SCHALKX



LIKE SO MANY OF THE WORLD'S BEST PLACES TO STAY, Chiva-Som didn't set out to take paying guests. Its founder, the late Boonchu Rojanastien, a high-flying banker and former Thai deputy prime minister, had founded his villa in seaside Hua Hin to be a weekend retreat for family and friends, a holistic refuge from Bangkok's madness.

It soon became obvious that Rojanastien, regarded as Thailand's first economics tsar, was as skilled at creating a feel-good country-club vibe as he was at balancing the books. His friends had friends, and given the circles he moved in, they were often rock stars and royalty. They were all intrigued by the politician's secret health sanctuary, keen to be 'Sommed' and willing to pay for the privilege. Not someone who did things by halves, in 1993 he rebuilt the original property, and sought out the most gifted therapists to staff it. Two years later Chiva-Som opened. Three years after that, it had proved such a success that he gave up politics entirely and devoted himself to turning it into one of the world's leading destination spas.

Twenty-five years on, it remains very hard to beat. The appealing intimacy of what was essentially a family home endures, as do the exacting standards; other top-level spas are constantly trying to poach its permanent team. Now under the stewardship of Rojanastien's son Krip, the resort has emerged from a four-year, £20 million refurb. Frankly, the facelift could not come a moment too soon. By the time the revamp got underway, the dark-wood interiors that had once seemed so charming felt dusty and dated in comparison to the striking modern architecture of newer wellness temples such as Vana in India and Euphoria in Greece.

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Chiva-Som is still unmistakably Thai, although designer Ed Tuttle has sensitively introduced contemporary counterpoints to the traditional vernacular. Burnished-gold ceiling details bring a soft glow to the 54 bedrooms, their silk furnishings now mellow teals and sun-bleached blues, and the wood throughout is pale, tactile bamboo. The new interiors feel current, luxurious but also suggest a warmth another wellness titan, Ananda in the Himalayas, slightly missed capturing with its recent renovations.

Wisely, the public areas have had a more radical makeover. The Orchid Lounge has a fresh indoor-outdoor set-up and the introduction of an on-the-house afternoon tea brings a heritage spin to the sociable lobbies so favoured by hip urban hotels. Although it cannot inject the innate spirituality of its arch rival Kamalaya on Koh Samui, the new moodboard is certainly making the latter's diehards think about defecting.

Thankfully, one element that hasn't changed is the food. I don't think there is another spa that offers such a wide range of dishes so cleverly constructed that you can enjoy three-course meals twice a day, feel lighter and more energised, and still somehow lose weight. There is not a hint of deprivation and yet one millionaire businessman shed a whopping 130lbs here – he did stay nine months though.

It's not just at dinner that you have an immense choice. The spa menu is so extensive it's almost daunting. Usually I'd suspect that a 200-strong treatment list would result in none being performed particularly well, but everything from acupuncture with a low-level electrical current to crystal massages is executed with six-star professionalism and a reassuring smile. The *chi nei tsang* abdominal massage is booked out by regulars months in advance. And here that means the likes of Serena Williams, Madonna and Kate Moss.

One London CEO has been 90 times, just one example of the cult-like devotion Chiva-Som inspires. There were wails of

frustration as guests waited for reservations to open up post-refurb and they will happily move rooms twice during their stay, if it means being squeezed in. I've met many people over the years who have recounted stories about how the team here have saved their lives. The gatekeepers, the naturopaths, are first rate: sympathetic, supportive, sensible. They direct you towards the most appropriate therapies, like an unflappable skipper on the bridge during high seas. Their advice seamlessly fuses the latest Western scientific research with the ancient intuitions of Ayurvedic and Chinese medicines to create easy-to-maintain new habits. The physiotherapy department is beyond compare. The physios at Lanserhof Lans in Austria are as good but they offer little in the way of back-up literature. Express even a fleeting interest in any exercise at Chiva-Som and a laminated A4 sheet with illustrated instructions will be waiting for you in your room.

One area where the resort underperformed in the past was on fitness. It always had an imaginative timetable of classes (power drumming anyone?) and a commitment to the latest workouts matched by a ruthlessness in ditching any that received negative feedback. Despite a considerable investment, the hyperbaric chamber lasted only one season, for example. But the facilities were old-fashioned. Now the shiny-new gym has a huge functional-fitness section. Fortunately, more often than not Chiva-Som gets it very right with new technology. The standout treatment on my most recent visit was Tecar Therapy, a machine which sends a high-frequency current through muscles to relax and repair them. My 'tech neck'

was completely pain-free after a few seconds and remained so for months. If only I could find somewhere near home that offers it.

However, that keenness to keep abreast of emerging modalities can sometimes be to its detriment. It has packed in rather too much to its seven acres, so the compound can feel cramped. Watsu, for example, is one of my favourite therapies but the pool here is plonked close to the main thoroughfare. It's not really a spectator sport so I decline a session. Hua Hin itself is over-developed with a snaggle of high-rise hotels that give the beach all the allure of Benidorm. Most regrettable though is that such a successful spa has bowed to commercial pressure and not only opened a medi-spa but, under the ruse of offering a complimentary skin analysis to all guests, does a soft sell for Botox and fillers. Such an approach feels at odds with its otherwise impeccable ethos of healthy ageing.

That aside, it is one of the few destination spas that always delivers. And when you consider there is an 85-strong army of doctors, beauticians and body specialists to tend up to 108 guests, you understand both why it must charge an average of £4,500 for a week and why occupancy is extremely high year round. Excitingly, its silver anniversary also signals a new beginning. It will open Zual Wellness Resort in Qatar this summer in collaboration with Msheirab Properties. Combining that famous Chiva-Som DNA with traditional Arabic medicine is a very tempting prospect; trimming five hours off the flight time is also thrilling, but even so I suspect it will have a hard time luring loyal fans from this extraordinary mothership. 📍

BOOK IT Healing Holidays offer a seven-night stay at Chiva-Som from £4,599 per person full board in an Ocean room, including flights, transfers, daily fitness activities, one daily treatment and unlimited use of the water-therapy suites. +44 20 3031 3838; healingholidays.com