

# Chiva-Som: Thailand's boot camp to the stars

Susan d'Arcy gets a whole-body overhaul after checking in to the revamped resort



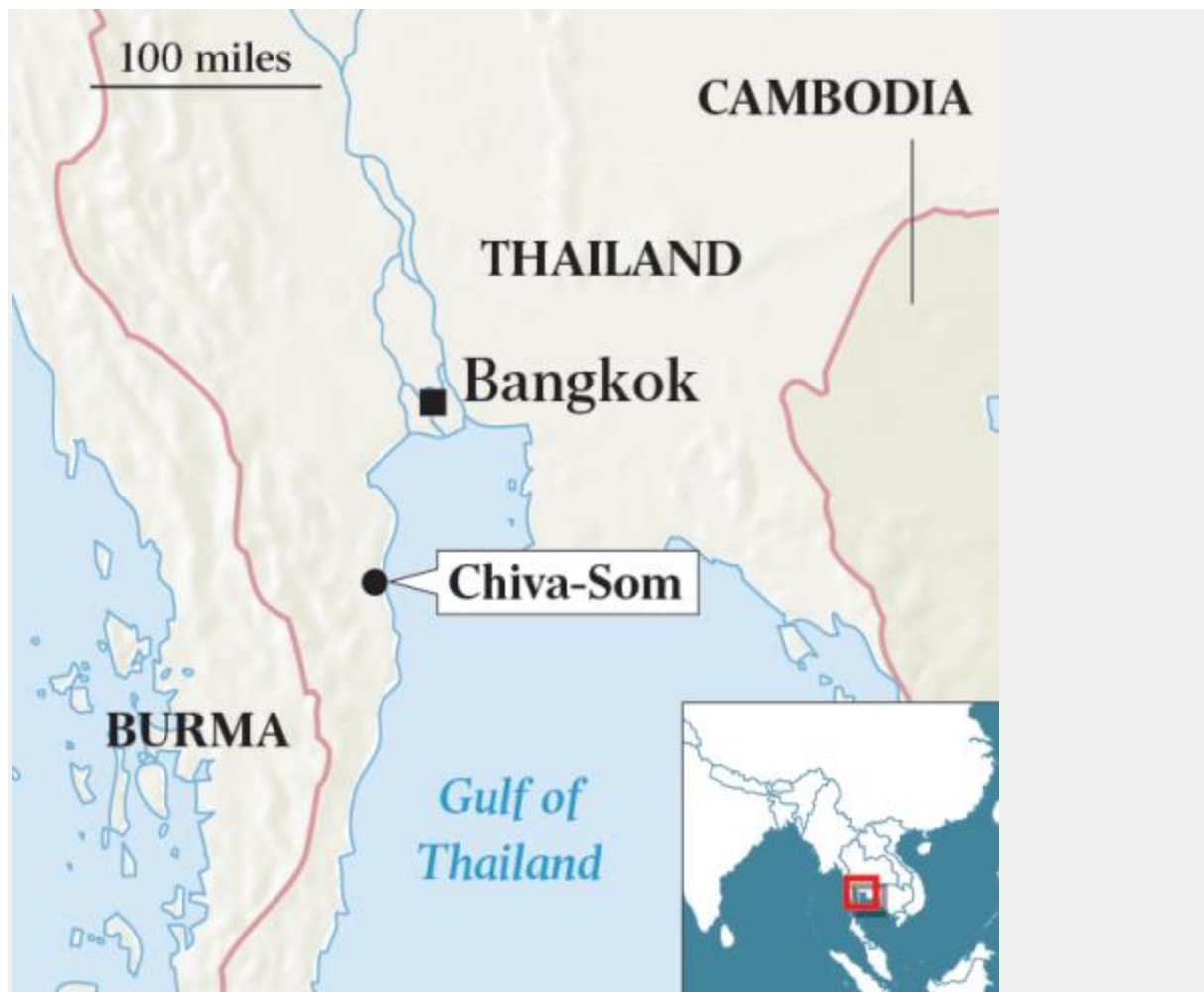
Chiva-Som has undergone an £18 million refurbishment KIATTIPONG PANCHEE

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Chiva-Som is where Elle Macpherson, Naomi Campbell, [Kylie Minogue](#) and their like go to get redcarpet-ready. One well-heeled businessman shed a whopping 60kg here — that's very nearly one and a half Kylies. He did stay for nine months, mind.

As the grande dame prepares to celebrate its 25th anniversary in April, she has just completed her own £18 million facelift. The new look has been introduced in phases over the past five years, with the treatment rooms and beachfront restaurant the last areas to get some TLC. They were unveiled last October and, like the rest of the 54-room resort, they have been transformed from deep-green, dark-wood decor with all the warmth of a dentist's waiting room to inviting, light, contemporary spaces. The makeover has also signalled a shift in emphasis from fatness to fitness, with expanded gym facilities, a state-of-the-art rehabilitation studio and revamped "Optimal Performance" retreats for those who want to get fit, recover from injury or achieve specific goals.



I fall into the last category. Three years ago, [I started weightlifting](#). To the amazement of the four men in my class, I kept hitting personal bests until, relative to our various weights, I was actually lifting more than them. Last year, however, I plateaued, while my fellow iron pumpers continued to improve. Did they let this go unremarked? Did they heck.

From my extensive medical training (read: box sets of *Grey's Anatomy*), I was convinced this was because of a stiff left hip. Could Chiva-Som's beefed-up fitness programme help? I discussed my aims and lifestyle with Nantika, a wellness adviser. She measured my blood pressure and weight, and offered some holistic solutions. I should try Epsom salt baths, drink camomile tea and, while she approved of my daily dose of magnesium to ease muscle ache, she suggested I take it in the evening rather than with my breakfast coffee, because this was flushing it out of my system before it could take effect. She then handed me over to the physiotherapy department.



The bathing pavilion

Chiva-Som has 12 physios as part of an 85-strong army of doctors, beauticians and body specialists tending to a maximum of 108 guests. Mine was Ploy, who started with a kinesthetic assessment to pinpoint any muscle imbalance and joint problems, and gauge my flexibility and posture. She photographed me against a grid, which showed my head was tilted slightly forward, my right shoulder rounded, my upper back slightly curved and lower spine twisted to one side. This would have been great news if I harboured any secret ambitions to play [Richard III](#).

During one functional movement test, I found it difficult to squat while holding a pole above my head. “It’s my dodgy left hip,” I confided. Ploy smiled sweetly: “Let’s test your core.” I can hold the plank for 15 minutes, I thought — this would be a breeze, wouldn’t it? Oh dear. The plank only works superficial muscles, Ploy told me, so you get as much out of planking for one minute as you do from longer durations. She explained kindly that my push-up and pelvic movement showed that my trunk stability, vital to power on to the next level of fitness, was actually weak. My hip abductor muscles were also particularly tight.





### Personal training on the beach

Over the next three days, I learnt exercises to correct these issues under the laser-like gaze of Ploy, who made teeny adjustments until I had perfect form. At other spas, a personal trainer may draw some matchstick men on a scrap of paper to remind me of particular moves. At Chiva-Som, laminated A4 instructions with photographic illustrations were sent to my room.

Ploy's physio-inspired, cranio-myofascial release massages were significantly more effective than the usual scented-oil and whale-song rubdowns. My standout treatment, though, was Tecar massage therapy, with a clever little device that sent a high-frequency current through my abductors to relax and repair them. This was so painful it could easily be a legal alternative to waterboarding, but my flexibility visibly increased; a few more sessions and I'm sure I'd be able to do the splits by now. Ploy also used Tecar on my "tech neck" and, after a few minutes, it was pain-free. Two weeks on, miraculously, it remains so. Forget Richard III; I'm now a shoo-in for Regan's headspinning scene in *The Exorcist*. Others reported similar successes. A sixtysomething Aussie, on his sixth visit, claimed Chiva-Som was all that stood between him and a hip replacement.

Between appointments, sunbathing held little appeal. Chiva-Som is in Hua Hin, 2½ hours' drive from Bangkok, on a long, thin beach scarred by Seventies high-rise hotels, and the hotel's outdoor pool didn't have much in the way of ambience. No matter: I had my pick of ten hours of daily group classes, from aqua aerobics to Thai boxing. I loved Metafit, a high-intensity workout with personal trainer Frame, a smiling assassin who squeezed every last drop of energy out of me. The timetable described gyrokinesis as a dynamic stretch combining yoga, t'ai chi and gymnastics. My reality? All the chair-based hip-thrusting felt more "Mr Bean tries pole dancing". Maybe regular practice, using my take-home notes, will give my spine the flexibility of a slinky toy.

Rather pathetically, I couldn't quite drop my weak-left-hip theory so Nantika arranged some isokinetic exercise. This involved a new bit of high-tech kit that measures muscular strength, generally recommended for those recovering from surgery. Turns out my left leg is in fact slightly stronger than my right. I'll never trust a medical drama again.



The revamp has given the resort a light, contemporary feel. Chiva-Som's reputation as the place to lose weight without a hint of deprivation remains wholly justified. I was on a measly 1,200 calories a day, but never felt hungry, with delicious breakfasts of pancakes with mulberry compote, lunches of curry noodle soup and teriyaki beef with vegetables, and suppers of stir-fried seafood. I lost a kilo in three days.

Back home and core engaged, I've already set a new shoulder press record, albeit just an extra 1.5kg, and my gym buddies have gone a little quiet again.

#### **NEED TO KNOW**

Susan d'Arcy was a guest of Chiva-Som and Healing Holidays. A seven-night retreat costs from £5,959pp, full board, including flights, transfers and treatments ([healingholidays.com](http://healingholidays.com))