

Perfectly posh peace



Chiva-Som resort.

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After some misgivings, Peter Lynch turns into a Chiva-Som believer.

LIZ Hurley demanded anonymity. So why did she carry a bag that bore her name in bold, gold letters? David Beckham and wife Posh planned to tone up their bodies. So why did he demand chips with every meal? Welcome to the weird and sometimes wacky world of stars and their spas. Innocent travellers should be warned that straining to spot celebrities may end in some painful and expensive physio.

Wellness resorts are one of travel's biggest boom sectors - and not just on the celebrity circuit. The numbers choosing a medi-spa holiday have grown 40 per cent in the past three years.

Travel Weekly magazine says there are more spas in America today than Starbucks coffee houses. In Australia, big business is eyeing up possibilities in every sector.

But as the market in detox, de-stress, diets and anti-ageing soars, how can anyone be sure of the quality of the treatments they are getting? The answer, aficionados say, is the resort's reputation. And few are regarded with quite the same reverence as Chiva-Som, three hours south of Bangkok.

It's on almost every award list for international destination spas, and frequently tops reader polls in the likes of Conde Nast Traveller and Travel+Leisure . Its spa cuisine is carried at the pointy end of a number of leading airlines.

Not that Chiva-Som is immune from the star syndrome. Far from it. It played host to Australian

TV's *Celebrity Overhaul* two years ago. Kylie Minogue, Kate Moss, Hugh Grant, Jude Law, Sadie Frost, Naomi Campbell and Megan Gale - as well as a not-so-anonymous Liz, and Posh and Becks have all chilled at its beachside rooms and Thai pavilions. Collette Dinnigan booked to stay this month, perhaps de-stressing after Paris and Milan.

And Elle Macpherson told an interviewer just last month: "I recently spent 10 days at Chiva-Som, and had the most extraordinary experience. It's like Club Med for holistic junkies; there is everything you could want to explore and experiment with, in a great nurturing environment."

Thankfully, the likes of Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton were too busy partying to stop by when we went to sample some of Chiva-Som's rejuvenating treatments.

Only Sir Clement Freud, the lugubrious 83-year-old former chef, writer and British MP, could be recognised among a guest list groaning with business gurus from Europe and America, and boomers looking to add another decade of decadence to their lives.

It all begins with a three-hour drive - celebs take a private plane, but it is less convenient and takes longer - from downtown Bangkok to the royal resort of Hua Hin, a more sedate seaside Thai town than neighbouring Pattaya, just across the Gulf of Thailand.

The drive through Hua Hin can be a bit of a let-down. The billboards from leading hotel brands and property developers all seem very Gold Coast. But once through the gates of Chiva-Som's compound, you enter a different world: tranquil lakes filled with koi; gardens filled with blooms; open Thai pavilions.

Golf buggies silently glide guests around the three-hectare site, which fronts the ocean. Indoor pools and treatment centres are landscaped into the gardens or located underground.

Only the number of people wearing Chiva-Som gowns gives a clue to the fact that this luxury resort is not just about lying in the sun, relaxing, but has a sound medical purpose.

The Body had it largely right. Chiva-Som - it means Haven of Life - is, indeed, a magnet for those who want to try holistic treatments.

It has them aplenty. Along with physio, fitness and the rather more exotic a la carte fare such as facial skin rejuvenation, skin tightening with Thermage (a laser treatment) and contouring with Titan Cutera (described as an infra-red pulse of light). The obligatory Botox is, of course, on offer.

Chiva-Som's menu of treatments runs to 105 pages - there's everything except cosmetic surgery. No blood, as general manager Paul Linder proudly boasts. "We are truly holistic."

We had assumed the worst after reading the literature about detox cleansing liquid diets and physical exercise. So we stopped over at Bangkok's wonderfully atmospheric Oriental Hotel for a last supper and a bottle of something bubbly, and stashed a couple of bottles of Yering Station pinot in the suitcase.

We needn't have bothered. While Chiva-Som's two restaurants do, indeed, label every dish with calorific content, and Chef Paisarn Cheewinsirawat's spa cuisine is world renowned for its health benefits, it is perfectly delicious. He spends his days devising low-fat ways of producing life's necessities such as chocolate cake and ice-cream. After tasting them I was ready to award him a

Nobel Prize. This is where scientific endeavour really ought to be concentrating its energies.

The beachside restaurant, Taste of Siam, even has an extensive wine list (only served after 6pm, but we could wait!). And a smokers' corner. One female guest from Kuwait was highly indignant. "How can they charge me for weight loss when you have a breakfast buffet," she cried. "You are supposed to lock me up and feed me liquids!" she told the staff.

"I have been to the best spas in Germany and they are very strict. This just isn't fair!"

Linder explained Chiva-Som's philosophy: it is for the guests to decide what they want to do. The staff helps them achieve it. But without a guest's commitment, they will never adopt the kind of lifestyle changes that will help them succeed once they are home. We are not a boot camp, he insisted patiently.

Nonetheless, Ms Kuwait was chaperoned around the buffet next day. A waiter followed her, armed with a diet sheet, a calculator and what looked suspiciously like a liquidiser.

Everyone receives a health and wellness consultation as soon as they arrive, a session designed to set some goals and ensure guests can cope with the treatments. They are paid a set salary and management insisted there is no incentive to sell some of the more exotic and expensive sessions.

Angela Palmer, a New Zealand naturopath and herbalist, quickly decided I needed a physical analysis (must have been that last plate of red curry prawns at the Oriental). I elected to try meditation and a chat with a UK expert from something called the College of Integrated Body Balance about backache. I also booked myself an 80-minute computer stress therapy session.

Angela looked genuinely concerned when I confessed I take artificial sweeteners with coffee, and promptly handed me a fact sheet claiming I was up for brain tumours, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and multiple sclerosis. I was solemnly handed a list of recommended herbal sweeteners.

Three massages and three spa meals a day are included in the price of a three-day package. There is also a long list of free daily activities, from Tai Chi Chuan or kung-fu at 7am to chakra healing circles and physical balance at 6pm.

Consultations take place in a modern health centre. Massage and other treatments are conducted in unisex areas attached to the health centre.

My Thai physiotherapist took minutes to work out my back problem: poor posture and an old knee injury meant I was leaning like the tower of Pisa. I definitely needed to loosen up.

The UK expert, John Brazier, suggested my neck was out of whack from a whiplash injury I never knew I had sustained. Definitely time to climb on the table and allow one of the specially trained manipulators - Chiva-Som runs its own academy in Bangkok and is consulting with the Thai Government to create uniform standards - to unknot some of the muscles in my back and neck.

Kanitha, the computer stress therapist, also worked on my back while bathing my hands in paraffin wax to help relieve the stress of tapping out all those stories on a computer keyboard.

There are 42 treatment rooms and 74 qualified therapists at Chiva-Som.

My attempts at meditation under the guidance of Dr Mano, a benign looking de-robed Buddhist monk and erstwhile Thai politician, was hard going. Closing my eyes and imagining myself a ball of light the size of the universe somehow didn't do the trick.

But all in all, I can understand why Chiva-Som and resorts like it are the choice of super-stressed superstars. It would be a sensational beachside resort. Throw in the lessons in life and health, and it represents great value.

About 1800 Australians will go to Chiva-Som this year, and the figure is expected to rise to 2000 next, Linder says.

The 13-year-old resort has just 57 rooms astonishing considering its huge reputation. But it is building a new and larger resort in northern Thailand, and planning a world expansion.

Five cities have been chosen for new urban retreats, and Sydney is one of them.

Unfortunately, we will have to wait until 2013 for that.

Now I'm back, how do I feel? Undoubtedly better. More importantly, I'm working on aches and pains I had given up on years ago. I am seeing a physio to continue the treatments; I am exercising more and eating better.

Did I lose weight? Er . . . I seemed to put on a kilogram. But losing weight was not my intention. And there was that night at the Oriental (and a session at the Skybar afterwards).

One tip that Chiva-Som suggests is a detox drink each morning before anything else: fresh lime juice and hot water. I'm still drinking it.

The writer was a guest of Thai Airways, The Tourism Authority of Thailand, Chiva-Som and Travel the World.

TRIP NOTES

Getting there:

Thai Airways flies three times daily from Sydney to Bangkok direct.

Prices start from \$960 including taxes. Phone Student Flights on 1800 069 063.

Guests have two options to get to Chiva-Som from Bangkok: take the movie star air shuttle service at about \$195 for the round trip or \$122 one way (flying time is about 35 minutes); or the more down-to-earth BMW 5 series limo \$215 for the 3.5-hour drive. We recommend the limo.

Staying there:

A three-night package at Chiva-Som starts from \$1725 a person, twin share, and includes an ocean view room, individual health and wellness consultation on arrival, a daily massage, three meals and participation in daily fitness and leisure programs. The Computer Stress Therapy costs \$172 for 80 minutes; an hour of individual meditation coaching costs \$125; 50 minutes of physiotherapy costs \$150 (the analysis is free). For Chiva-Som information and bookings call Travel the World on (02) 8296 7074 or see <http://www.traveltheworld.com.au>

For information about Thailand: <http://www.thailand.net.au> or Tourism Authority of Thailand, (02) 9247 7549.

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