



THAI TREAT

When you check into the Chiva-Som resort you'll be spoilt in style with world-class wellness programs that have been soothing people's senses and restoring that sense of wellbeing we all seek for the past two decades.

Eyes shut, body relaxed, I feel like I'm soaring through star-studded, ink-blue skies as I glide across the warm water in a small, circular pool. "Just lay back, relax and surrender your body and soul," says therapist Jinnapat during a watsu treatment, a mix of massage, shiatsu and muscle stretching, performed in water.

So that's what I do and it's a pleasing sensation as I swirl, twist and turn – inhibitions abandoned.

The treatment continues as I am pushed ever so gently this way and that, my legs raised and arms stretched, aided by neck and ankle floats.

Watsu is one of the signature treatments offered at the luxury Chiva-Som International Health Resort, nestled beside a pristine beach at Hua Hin, on the west coast of the Gulf of Thailand.

I'm told the treatment often evokes tears, with many describing it as a rebirthing. For me, there's definitely a spiritual connection and it is one of the most relaxing treatments I experience here.

Chiva-Som, Thai for "haven of life", is Asia's first comprehensive wellness retreat and destination spa

and is celebrating its 22nd anniversary this year.

It has long been at the pinnacle of world-wide wellness resorts, with a string of coveted awards, accolades and life-changing tales. It is a favourite haunt of A-listers, who drop in to re-energise, along with health devotees and those who simply want to discover more about themselves and make healthy lifestyle changes.

But it's no boot camp with forbidden foods and locks on fridges. The Chiva-Som way is a holistic approach, dealing with diet, exercise, activity, rest and relaxation, physical ailments, emotional issues and your inner self.

On arrival, guests complete a health-and-wellness consultation to determine their health and goals. My consultant says it's all about balancing and rejuvenating the mind, body and spirit as we work together on a daily program that includes sessions with health professionals, naturopaths, fitness instructors, spa therapists, nutritionists and health practitioners.

Aqua yoga, super stretching, an Oriental foot ritual, signature massages, a papaya body wrap,



JOURNEY TO WELLNESS

Chiva-Som's unique blend of traditional and advanced therapies in a tranquil environment is enhanced by the caring nature of their dedicated therapists, who nurture you through the rejuvenating and healing process to reach true balance of the mind, body and spirit. The spa journey begins in the Water Therapy Suites with cleansing and restorative heat treatments such as sauna, steam room and Jacuzzi or relaxation on a heated waterbed as you sip Lemongrass tea.



facials, skin analysis, a nutrition consultation and a physiotherapy session are scheduled.

I plunge straight into the more unusual therapies because at home in country NSW my daily exercise is walking along dirt roads beside paddocks where sheep and cattle graze.

Days are busy in a good way at Chiva-Som, which was founded by the late Boonchu Rojanastien, a Thai politician and wealthy businessman. A memorial in the library carries his epitaph – “above all, enjoy life” – a sentiment that’s reflected throughout the resort and echoed by general manager Sheila McCann, who says she hopes when guests leave that they have the knowledge to make better life decisions for health and wellbeing.

“Using a combination of therapies through our highly individualised program, we transform not just the physical, but the thinking behind health, creating an active learning process. Many times, Chiva-Som is the jumpstart to a healthier life,” she says. “Guests are in a safe environment, where they are nurtured and guided into making better choices to change their lifestyles in the longer term.”

Days start with a stunning, golden-sunrise walk along the beach, where saffron-robed monks often wander for alms and recite prayers in return and volunteer lifeguards ride horses.

Then it’s an ocean swim, a dip in the pool and a quick change for yoga. A novice at yoga, I find each session a little easier than the last, as I am encouraged to stretch and bend in the outdoor pavilion.

One of my favourite activities is definitely the drum fitness class, where I am handed two drumsticks and instructed to stand before a large, blue ball on a stand.

It starts off sedately as we tap the ball, crossing and uncrossing our drumsticks, but as the music builds we are told to belt the ball harder and harder. Before long we are really whacking it and it feels so good. “Doubles, singles, side ball, front ball,” yells our instructor, as the music tempo quickens and

drumsticks fly through the air. It quickly turns into an intensive cardio workout that’s good for the upper body and brain coordination. It’s fun, even if you mix up the doubles with the singles, but that’s the great thing about Chiva-Som – you just do your best.

Dining is an adventure here, with spa cuisine that tastes and looks amazing. It’s prepared by award-winning executive chef Paisarn Cheewinsiriwat. Trained in classical French methods, he joined Chiva-Som in 2003 and soon became fascinated with healthy spa cuisine, which he says features three main elements – nutrition, flavour and presentation.

“The secret to healthy living is connected to diet and the nutrition it provides. Food should also taste good and include a balance – it’s not about regimented dining with forbidden foods,” he says.

His culinary team of 45 prepares three meals a day for guests at the 58-room resort. Guests can dine in the vivid upstairs Emerald Room or beach-side in the open-air restaurant that’s organic by day and turns into the Taste of Siam restaurant in the evening, serving traditional Thai food.

Standouts from the menu include the pomelo-and-prawn salad, chicken green curry, beef with oyster sauce, rock lobster and a finale of black sticky rice with mango. Every dish is tasty and looks amazing – but it’s all about small portions.

Mocktails and wine and champagne are available at a cost, but many choose not to indulge. Tea is served in the Orchid Lounge and the library transforms into the Piano Lounge in the evening, where you can sit and listen to a passionate pianist.

Every Saturday night there’s a themed, outdoor barbecue and cooking classes are also offered. There’s a talker’s table in the Emerald Room restaurant for solo guests wanting conversation.

Life is to be enjoyed here, whether it’s a quiet moment sitting on a cushion, sipping herbal tea in a shady pavilion overlooking a pond, smelling the fragrant frangipani, walking beside the huge banyan trees, or relaxing by the pool. Mobile phones, laptops and reading devices are banned in public places, but wi-fi is available in the accommodation, which ranges from chic, new ocean suites to traditional, Thai-style pavilions.

There are 70 treatment rooms, a kinesis studio, gym, watsu pool, flotation pool, large outdoor swimming pool, bathing pavilion with a Kneipp bath, sauna, steam, Jacuzzi and indoor swimming pool set in manicured gardens. Even when the resort is full, it never feels crowded because guests are following different programs.

Like they say, a stay at Chiva-Som is a kickstart to a healthier lifestyle. Now I just have to work on those portions. 

chivasom.com

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MASSAGE

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