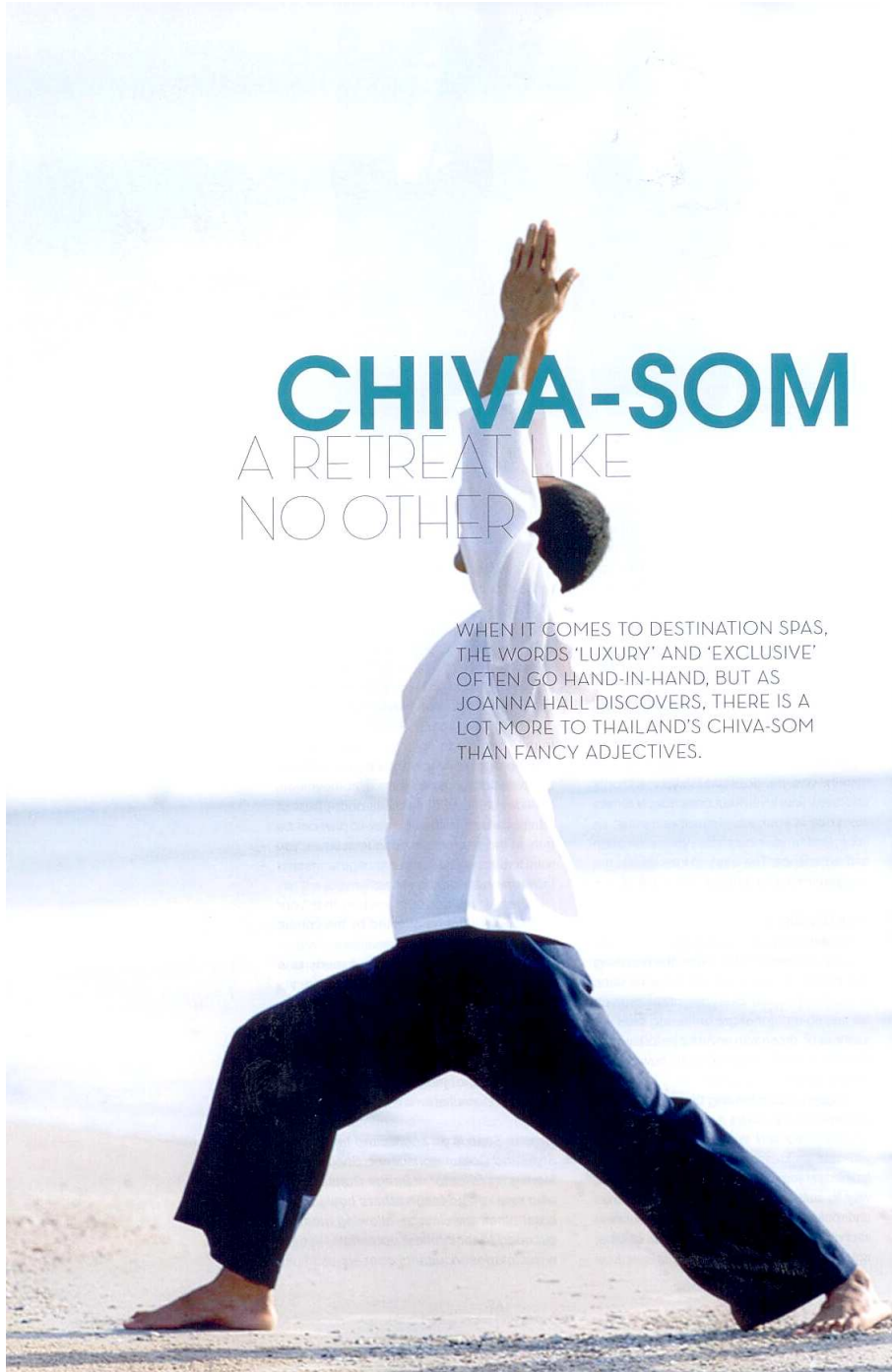



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Chiva-Som means 'haven of life'. People seek sanctuary here for a variety of reasons - to lose weight, de-stress or to get a health problem under control.

As I lie in the warm, dimly-lit relaxation room, on the world's most comfortable water bed, I find myself rapidly filling with guilt. It is Monday afternoon and I am in-between appointments on day one of a much anticipated stay at Thailand's exclusive Chiva-Som health retreat.

With half an hour to spare before my last scheduled 'activity' of the day (a full-body aromatherapy massage), I was encouraged by the Spa staff to use those precious minutes for some quiet time alone. The only trouble is that my mind is not exactly playing along.

At this time on a normal day at home, I would be writing at my computer, doing accounts or attending a meeting. Lying on a water bed - without a watch, or a care in the world, in the middle of the afternoon - seems like a somewhat frivolous waste of time.

But as I soon discover, a major part of wellness is not just about how much you weigh, or how many kilometres you can run, but how you treat your mind and soul.

I arrived in Bangkok the previous evening, feeling excited on several fronts. For one, I was about to experience one of the world's most famous and exclusive health Spas, rubbings shoulders - albeit discreetly - with the rich and famous, and other stressed-out business execs. But I had also come to Thailand's royal resort destination of Hua Hin on somewhat of a personal quest.

Chiva-Som means 'haven of life' and I am told by the property's General Manager, Paul Linder, that people seek sanctuary here for a variety of reasons - to lose weight, de-stress or to get a health problem under control.

But a stay at this sublime campus of wellness is a chance to escape the real world and focus unashamedly on you. It is an opportunity to switch off your mobile phone, put away your laptop and swap a suit for a cotton bathrobe, an item of clothing which you are encouraged to wear a lot!

Regardless of which retreat you choose, everyone starts their journey in the same way - with a wellness assessment. After completing an extensive questionnaire of my physical and mental state, I met with a personal counsellor to discuss my expectations and needs.

If a guest wants to focus on yoga and meditation, there are daily classes. If you need

to lose a few kilos, you can follow a detox diet and exercise regime. And if you need past-life regression therapy, or want to banish sugar cravings, there is sure to be a treatment in the extensive menu to help.

My primary goal, however, is to put my ailing shoulder - incapacitated with calcific tendonitis for more than a year - on the road to recovery. It's a condition where crystalline calcium deposits form in the tendons of the rotator cuff, causing pain, restriction of movement and, in my case, problems with some of the surrounding muscles of the shoulder and upper arm.

After chatting with my counsellor, May, I also realised that my physical problems had taken their toll elsewhere and I was a few kilos heavier than I wanted to be. May arranged an appointment with one of the in-house physiotherapists for a full assessment of my condition, followed by an hour of physical therapy. Then she suggested some other things I could do during my stay which would help, including yoga, swimming and creative visualisation, and booked appointments for a variety of therapies, including acupuncture and massage.

Over the next few days, my schedule was reasonably busy with physical activity to help rehab my shoulder, as well as several unique treatments offered by the visiting therapists from Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat in Queensland. One of these treatments is Rockupuncture, which eases the discomfort in my shoulder and acts a de-stressor. A therapy created by Keri Krieger, it fuses Japanese-influenced acupuncture (using finer needles) with massage using heated basalt stones.

Another treatment is Sound and Stone Therapy, created by Gwinganna massage specialist Craig Howorth. This intense, holistic treatment combines meditation, a menu of massage styles and hot stones, performed to a diverse soundtrack of music and sounds.

One of the many unique Chiva-Som signature experiences I enjoyed included Sound Bath Therapy, a 75-minute journey using sound vibrations and visualisation to realign the body's equilibrium and to banish stress. I also had a go at floatation therapy, but you can forget any ideas of those coffin-like tanks of the 1980s and early 1990s. At Chiva-Som,

you relax in your own private suite, floating for 45 minutes to soft music in a large, circular pool beneath a beautifully decorated dome.

For me, food is an important part of daily life. Especially Thai food! This is partly to blame for the extra kilos I've acquired during my physical problem. I expected Chiva-Som's health cuisine to involve a lot of raw grains and steamed fish, but I couldn't have been more wrong. In fact, the food was so incredibly tasty that I went to a cooking class during my stay to learn some of the basics, and even bought a copy of *Spa Thai Cuisine* to take home as a useful memento. In the two-hour class, we created some amazing dishes: a popular Thai soup and dessert, sea bass with Thai salad, and beef with almond curry sauce. Our teacher, Wanthong, explained the retreat's philosophy, which is based on the view that your diet is inextricably connected to your long-term health.

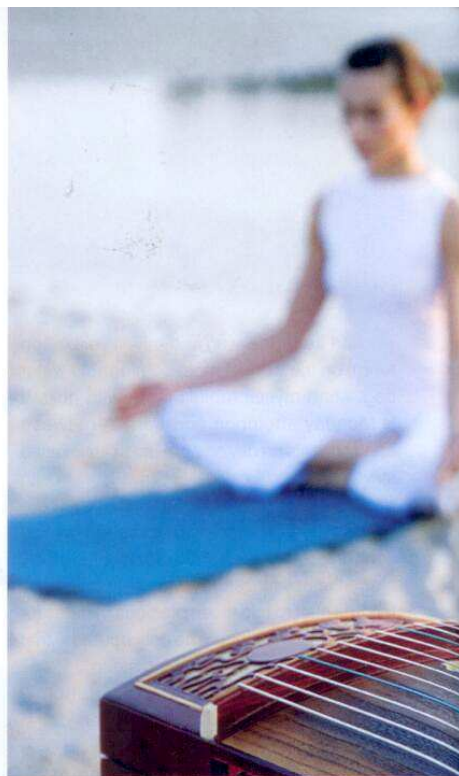
The cuisine involves cooking with no oil. Instead the chefs use a home-made vegetable stock and minimise the use of saturated fats and excess cholesterol. There is also a strong focus on fresh and organic produce. The retreat has two organic gardens just 10 minutes away, one of which is devoted to growing orchids and flowers, while the other supplies most of the fruit, vegetables and herbs used in the kitchens.

On my last afternoon, I went for a final consultation with May to see how things had gone during my stay. On top of my list of things to report was a major breakthrough with my shoulder. For the first time in months, I had slept through the night without waking in pain or discomfort. I had also rekindled my love for swimming, which was helping with mobility and rebuilding muscle tone. And there was another bonus, as the scales indicated I had lost around half a kilo.

After our chat, I had some time to kill before my final massage. Without hesitation, I made straight for one of my favourite spots at Chiva-Som, the relaxation room. As I lay back on the warm, gently undulating water bed, I had time to reflect on my past four days in this haven of life.

Chiva-Som is not for everyone. You won't be taking holiday snaps around the pool, as cameras are forbidden. Use of mobile phones is restricted to your accommodation. And forget any thoughts of drinking late into the night; wine and champagne are served in the evening, but for the most part guests turn in early to get a fresh start the following day.

What you do get, however, is a break away



from your normal, sometimes bad, habits and the opportunity to take a long, hard look at your overall health. For many people, myself included, that involves banishing pangs of guilt for relaxing on a water bed in the afternoon!

OUT AND ABOUT IN HUA HIN

Only three hours from Bangkok, Hua Hin has been a favoured resort destination since it was 'discovered' in the early 1920s. Blessed with both sea and mountain breezes, this picturesque destination is popular with Thais as well as foreigners, and is well worth exploring. Here are the top sights:

TAKIAP BEACH

Chiva-Som sits on this pristine section of beach, which forms part of the extensive Hua Hin Beach stretching some 25 kilometres north as far as Cha-am. Long, flat, and boasting clean white sand, Takiap Beach is perfect for a sunrise jog or a long walk. The benign surf rolling in from the Gulf of Siam is warm and safe for a leisurely ocean dip, and horse riding is also an option from one of the locals.

KHAO TAKIAP

Rising up at the southern end of Takiap Beach, this pretty headland is dominated by an impressive golden Buddha, and is also home to a small number of picturesque and serene temples. The most popular is Khao Takiap temple, commonly called Monkey Mountain due to a growing band of cheeky macaques that have made the grounds their home.



KLAI KANGWON PALACE

Just north of Hua Hin on the beachfront stands this beautiful summer palace, built by Thailand's King Rama VII in 1926. Designed with a European architectural feel, it consists of three Spanish-style villas facing outwards towards the Gulf of Siam. The palace and its beautifully manicured gardens are open daily from 9am to 4pm.

HUA HIN STATION

Built during the reign of King Rama VI with a distinctive red-and-white gingerbread style of architecture, this is arguably Thailand's most beautiful train station, as well as one of its oldest. The station was built in the 1920s, when Hua Hin's popularity as a resort destination increased, and the railway line from Bangkok was constructed. Today it is one of Hua Hin's most beloved and photographed landmarks.

NAMTOK PA LA-U

If you feel like a longer excursion, this stunning, 11-tier waterfall is located in a densely verdant forest in the area of the Kaengkrajai National Park, west of Hua Hin. Some of the waterfall's tiers can be reached via trekking trails, and the area is especially beautiful early in the morning, when many butterflies and birds appear.

THE FACTS

Thai Airways fly 40 times a week from Australia to Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport. For more information, contact Thai Airways on 1300 651 960 or www.thaiairways.com.au.

Transfers from Bangkok to Hua Hin by car take around three hours and can be arranged through Chiva-Som or a private operator such as Bangkok Airport Transfer (www.bangkokairport-transfer.com). Chiva-Som has only 57 rooms and suites, with a choice of Thai-inspired pavilions and Western-style accommodation overlooking the ocean. The retreat offers more than 150 treatments and activities, with 70 treatment rooms and more than 85 qualified therapists. Among its extensive facilities are a gym, two pools and yoga pavilions.

A 6-night fly/stay Wellness Retreat Package starts from \$6,885 per person, including return economy airfares, private car transfers, one night of accommodation at The Peninsula Bangkok (or similar) including breakfast, five nights at Chiva-Som and a credit of Thai baht 7,860 towards health and wellness treatments. All packages include three meals per night of stay, daily massage, individual health and wellness consultation, daily fitness and leisure activities, and use of water therapy suites. For more information, call Travel the World on 1300 766 566 or visit www.traveltheworld.com.au.