

BY JANE SOUTHWARD

Sharing the caring

THAILAND OFFERS UNIQUE EXPERIENCES FOR THE TRAVELLER SEEKING A HEALING SPA OR HEALTH RETREAT HOLIDAY. RECENTLY, TWO AUSTRALIAN THERAPISTS HAVE BEEN SWAPPING IDEAS AND TREATMENTS WITH A THAI HEALTH RESORT.



Chiva-Som,
Thailand

The monks don't notice us as we sit on cushioned pool lounges to do our meditation. Their golden robes glow as the sun rises over the Gulf of Thailand. A few dogs bark as they rumble further down what is a pretty ugly beach, dotted with stalls selling soft drinks and sticky rice and, later in the day, cheap massage stalls with locals missing teeth who juggle kids, dogs and massage oil as they urge you to relax with them. Yet the three monks are having none of it — they simply stroll along Hua Hin Beach slowly, accepting offerings from locals who believe helping them will bring earthly and spiritual rewards.

On a more temporal level, Australian naturopath Keri Krieger is in heaven. The acupuncture expert based on the Gold Coast and working from Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat is in the grip of peaceful thought alongside me as meditation expert Danchai Chemprateep works his magic. Danchai tells us to become aware of "our human pollution" and to acknowledge that "true nourishment comes from within". He urges us to train our minds with compassion and to "spiral out the dark energy of negative thoughts and stiffness in the neck". Next, he leads us to breathe in white light and, as we exhale, breathe out grudges, negative thoughts and fear.

Maybe it's the five days away from my family, maybe it's the belting Thai sun



(even at 7am), maybe it's the presence of the monks, but Danchai's meditation class is powerful. For the final 20 minutes of the session I sob and, as the tears flow, I have no idea what I am crying about. It's only on my return to Australia that I feel a sense of freedom and realise I have set aside deep resentments for the years of exhaustion involved in raising three children under five with a husband working night shift. The breathing techniques led by Danchai leave me feeling free.

I'm joined at Chiva-Som by Kerri and her colleague Craig Howorth who are here as part of an international exchange of ideas, supported by both spas. The aim is to share expertise and improve both retreats while offering guests something a little different from another land. A team of Chiva-Som therapists has since visited Gwinganna and shared their expertise with guests.

AUSTRALIAN INGENUITY

Craig Howorth's treatment brings the sound of kookaburras to the Thai resort as his unique form of music massage combines different massage techniques with a soaring and swooping music track he recorded on the Gold Coast. His

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specialist treatment is called Sound and Stone, which he says "employs sound and its careful organisation into music during meditation and bodywork".

This was created through what he calls "an evolutionary process". Previously he had worked in hospitality in five-star hotels, mainly as a concierge while working as a disc jockey at night to satisfy his interest in music. A few years ago he joined Gwinganna Health Retreat, owned by a consortium that includes Deborah-Lee Furness, Hugh Jackman and Tony de Leede. Gwinganna supported Craig by funding a purpose-built, soundproof

room and a massage table wired to the audio system. Craig wears rubber-soled, neoprene slippers during the treatment so the only sound clients hear is the music. The treatment, Craig says, "Can be very freeing. People often say the experience makes them feel lifted on a cushion of sound."

For Keri, Chiva-Som offered her first taste of Thai life and big lessons in the power of meditation. "To be honest, before this experience I understood technically how meditation was good for you but never from a personal point of view," she says. "I have Danchai and Chiva-Som to thank for my →

new-found practice and resulting clarity. Danchai asks us to absorb the light and I am suddenly clear, a smile wraps itself around my face spontaneously. Meditation leaves me feeling loved, my shoulders are relaxed and my breathing is easy."

Keri's specialist treatment that she is bringing to Chiva-Som is called "rockupuncture" and it's a combination of traditional acupuncture and hot stone massage. The needles are applied to the skin and pushed flat. A towel is placed over the top and hot stones applied. While these do their work, Keri massages the lower body using hot stones. "It's such a lush treatment and together the two therapies help you get the most from each," Keri explains. "I like to work actively on the legs and feet with the hot stones then, once I take the points out, I work actively on the back. The result can be a deeply relaxing experience."

THE THAI SIDE

A stay at Chiva-Som, a three-hour drive south of Bangkok, begins with a health and wellness consultation where you are weighed, set goals and choose the treatments for your stay. It can be a confusing half hour as the resort offers so many treatments. One of the most popular is a deep stomach massage called Chi Nei Tsang, which is an internal organ massage mostly over the navel. It is meant to help unblock energy that is draining the organs and can help people release negative emotions. Another popular treatment is cranio-sacral therapy in which the head and face are massaged



Retreats in Thailand

There are, of course, a wide range of health retreats and resorts in Thailand to sample. Thai massage is often called "lazy man's yoga" and combines yoga postures, acupressure, rocking and stretching. The treatment isn't as relaxing as Swedish massage, but, according to Craig Howorth, it can be powerful if you want to release tension (physical or emotional) and loosen up the muscles.

At the Wat Po Thai Spa, named in honour of one of the most majestic temples in Bangkok, Thai massage is used as a Buddhist form of physiotherapy. Developed 2000 years ago by the physician to the Buddha Jivaka Kumarabhacca who is credited with spreading the practice of Thai yoga bodywork as a way to soothe the

muscles of monks who spend hours practising meditation. The monks, supported by Thai royalty, preserved the teachings and passed them down from one generation to the next in the form of an oral tradition. Each master in turn would personally transmit and pass on the lineage and knowledge to the next generation in a solemn ceremony.

If you are visiting Thailand, here are some health retreats that offer Thai massage and other treatments:

DHARMA HEALING INTERNATIONAL

If you are into fasting, Dharma Healing International on Koh Samui runs cleansing and weight loss programs from seven to 31 days heavily influenced by

Buddhist principles of spiritual renewal including meditation. Expect regular colonic irrigation, which the centre believes is vital to detoxification. The program is run right near one of the prettiest beaches in Thailand.

TAO GARDEN HEALTH SPA AND RESORT

If you are in the north of Thailand, consider this tai chi and meditation retreat set up next to a 200-room hotel in Chiang Mai. With two Tai Chi pavilions and a large meditation auditorium, staff are on hand to teach meditation and exercise techniques they believe increase longevity. There are also courts for ping pong, badminton and tennis as well as a gym and pool.

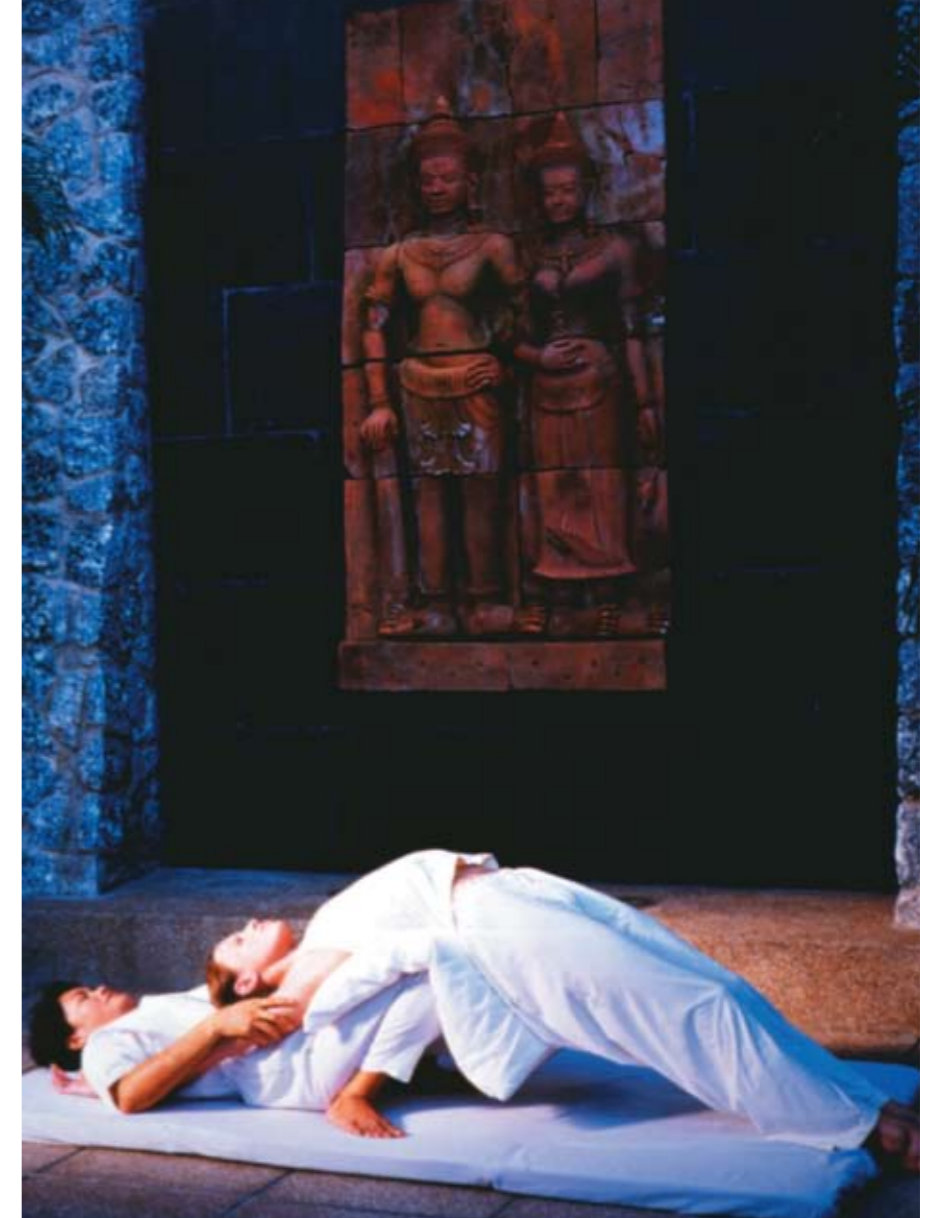
SPA CENARVEE

In Bangkok, many hotels have

day spas. Spa Cenvaree on the 26th floor of the CentralWorld Hotel offers a traditional Thai massage with the application of a herbal compress to relieve muscle aches and pains. This spa won the award for Thailand's Best New Spa at the 2009 Asia Spa and Wellness Festival.

SIX SENSES DESTINATION SPA

This new retreat on Phuket is one of Thailand's most luxurious, combining resort-style services with an opulent spa and access to holistic specialists. *Travel + Leisure* rated it among the magazine's 2009 Top 45 new retreats in the world. The accommodation is luxurious with many bungalows having their own plunge pools as well as butler service. You can choose a raw food menu or "fishetarian".



William says he has seen people lose as much as 20 kilos over two weeks but doesn't recommend such a drastic weight loss, saying a reduction of one to two kilos a week is sensible.

with the aim of improving the flow of cerebro-spinal fluid. It's a favourite of in-house naturopath William Engelbert who says it can be useful for anyone who gets migraines, chronic neck and back pain, stress or anxiety.

At the cooking school, guests get the chance to pick up some ideas from the chef, watched by a naturopath who explains the nutritional benefits of what is being created and there's also a cookbook. The essence of the dining experience is that there is no oil used in any of the

cooking. Instead, they use vegetable stock and a lot of steaming.

Each evening, three juicy limes are left in the room for you to cut first thing the next morning and add to water — it is said to kick-start the digestive system. The resort urges guests not to drink alcohol with meals, saying there is nothing to be gained by diluting stomach acids.

At breakfast and lunch, the buffet includes Ayurvedic powders to add to cereal and soups, as well as linseed, sunflower and almond meal or LSA, dried

fruits and nuts. "I am a strong believer in the power of starting each meal with fiery or bitter foods that stimulate digestion and get the liver activated," Engelbert says. "Chilli, ginger, cinnamon, cardamom, radichio, thyme, rosemary, basil, rocket and dandelion leaf are all good. Sour also stimulates digestion." William says he has seen people lose as much as 20 kilos over two weeks but doesn't recommend such a drastic weight loss, saying a reduction of one to two kilos a week is sensible.



Craig Howorth