



writer Rachael Oaks Ash

turning back time

There comes a time in everyone's life when you just have to accept how old you are. I have been wrestling with this since turning 40. I am in such denial about my age I don't even want to say it out loud and am tempted to change it in print to 35. If it's published then that must be my age, right?

My body, of course, gives away my age. My hips have the flexibility of concrete, a ski injury on my left knee two years ago has never healed properly and the bone spurs on the vertebrae in my neck that keep my right arm numb have been caused by degeneration.

Too many years of low grade stress from work, relationships and finances combined with a life spent on planes has resulted in adrenal fatigue and a body clock that doesn't know what time, year or century it is. Put simply, I'm old before my time and falling apart.

Chiva-Som wellness retreat in Hua Hin, Thailand is 15 years of age this year. The leading destination spa in Asia raised the bar for all other retreats that followed. Set on the mainland beach at Hua Hin, Thailand, Chiva-Som has pampered, pummelled and pounded the bodies of European royalty, Hollywood elite, Britain's fashion set and Fortune 500s for a decade and a half. Guests arrive worn out, tired, a little jaded around the edges and leave feeling half their age. Sounds like the place for me.

DAY ONE

My flight arrives at one in the morning and true to form when on a schedule the customs line at Bangkok Airport is long and tedious. By the time I get out, I am ready to crash and by the time I make it to Chiva-Som, two and a half hours drive away, I simply close the blinds to my villa, turn the do not disturb sign on and pass out.

I wake mid-morning in time for my first wellness consultation in the 70 treatment room spa where we discuss my goals for the week. At this stage, my main goal is sleep.

I decide to concentrate on addressing my adrenal exhaustion with some detoxification. This means a three to five day cleansing diet of no caffeine, no sugars, no starches, no fun and this is day one.

I get to eat on the first day, prune and apple for breakfast, shredded salads with beetroot dressing and a broth for dinner then it's juices and smoothies, juices and smoothies and just to mix it up, more juices and smoothies.

I spend the rest of the day by the pool dozing in and out of sleep before ordering room service broth and watching an in-house movie. Clearly socialising with other guests is not high on my agenda.

DAY TWO

I have been told by Chiva-Som's naturopath to concentrate on yin not yang activities. Yang activities are high energy and require adrenaline which, after years of high stress living, I have little of.

Aerobics, boxing, long distance running are all out for me this week so I start today with a walk along Hua Hin beach, leaving my shoes at the gate and relishing the sand and ocean between my toes. I am up in time for the sunrise on the horizon and the silhouette of the fishermen and their boats makes me reach for my iphone so I can share a photo

with the world, only I don't have it.

Mobile phones and cameras are strictly forbidden in communal areas of Chiva-Som so I guess I am forced to just enjoy the moment for myself. I am itching to turn on a computer, check my emails and update my status on Facebook but I have deliberately left my laptop at home.

The stress created by constant communication and a belief that the world will fall apart if I am not in it has added to my adrenal fatigue and created worry lines on my face prematurely ageing me. Surely I can live without the internet for a week?



Pre breakfast yoga calms my mind, for a short time. Cleansing juice and liver supplements are taken as 'breakfast' by the pool before a sound healing meditation with former Buddhist monk, Danchai. The idea is to lose myself in the sound of Tibetan bowls, bells, harps and various other instruments he plays around me. It works, I fall asleep.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror while preparing for the steam room. I look older than when I arrived with deep dark circles around my eyes. Oh dear.

DAY THREE

The medi spa is discreetly set apart from the more mainstream thoroughfares of Chiva-Som. Doctors here can take away years

with a simple jab of a Botox needle or a zap of a laser on the skin. I am tempted by their white coats and soothing smiles when I wander past. It would be so much easier to get an instant fix.

Instead I see Dr Somboon Roongphornchai, he is the Anti-Ageing and Integrative Medicine Doctor at Chiva-Som. He works here on a Monday and Tuesday and is predictably booked out. Clients can also visit him at Vitallife Wellness Centre at the Bumrungrad International Hospital in Bangkok where he is a medical director.

He talks me through my health, asking me questions about my menstruation, sleeping patterns, diet, exercise, work ethics and more. As a specialist in natural hormone supplements and bio-identical hormones to help slow down the ageing process, he is looking for hormone imbalances.

A fibroid operation last year reveals excess oestrogen. My adrenal fatigue means I am producing too much cortisol which is responsible for my thickening middle (I thought it was the mid morning muffins I have been inhaling back home).

He gives me DHEA, a hormone that is said to create longevity and slow down the process of ageing and suggests 7-Keto DHEA to reduce body fat. It is said to burn more calories and increase metabolic rate, however it doesn't have the adrenal effects of caffeine or ephedrine. His recommendation is to take it daily while engaging in a three week exercise regime. Me and my expanding waistline are willing to try anything.

The constant changing of time zones through too much international travel has played havoc with my bio rhythms too. He warns me about body clock and jetlag and how it can negatively impact the body, before prescribing me some melatonin to be taken before sleeping each night. I wonder

how I'll explain the six yellow pills in a plastic packet to customs at Bangkok airport.

I don't feel any younger when I leave but I do feel I have a better understanding of my adrenal output and how it impacts my body. Obviously I am not going to give up travel writing, for now, but the melatonin and DHEA may help and at least I wasn't thinking about food for an hour.

DAY FOUR

I have extended my three day cleanse to five. Morning beach walks have been clearing my mind and the daily yoga has helped my thoughts slow down. I have met some fellow detoxers at yoga and by the pool and am starting to feel more social. The juices at breakfast, smoothies at mid morning, broths for lunch and more again for afternoon tea and dinner have been far easier than I expected. I haven't braved the restaurant at dinner time though, preferring to eat in my room to resist temptation.

Visiting therapist, Takeshi Kitagawa, is here from Japan. He is a celebrity in Tokyo where his spa is filled with society's elite and his acupuncture facials are said to be better than a face lift. Ok, I know that's an exaggeration but I adore acupuncture and respond to it very well so I'm first in line for his treatment.

My knee has been playing up and he immediately treats me with 'fire acupuncture.' This has to be the most painful acupuncture I have ever experienced in my life and I burst into tears as a thick needle goes through a flame and punctures my skin briefly before doing it again on five different points. If I could scream, I would but I am so shocked that I can't and instead kick out at poor Takeshi.

I am hesitant to lie down on the treatment table but Takeshi is such a smiling assassin he soothes me with his cheeky grin and humble demeanour, so I oblige. An acupuncture facial involves 100 needles being placed

into the face along the forehead, around the eyes, along the cheekbones and the jaw line.

The first few are fine, I don't even mind them around the eye region but once he hits my sinuses along my forehead I begin to wince. When he stabs a needle into my inner eye near my tear duct I immediately start crying and refuse to let him do it to the other eye. He's worried my face will be lopsided. I don't care and start sobbing.

I am not in pain, I am just overwhelmed with an emotional release that wracks through my body with each exhalation. It is strangely liberating if Takeshi wasn't so scared he had hurt me, which he hadn't (unless you count the knee). Having someone work this close within your personal space, touching an area of the body so rarely touched is daunting and I feel very vulnerable.

When the 99th needle goes in I am done, though concerned he may try to slip that 100th into the missing tear duct.

THIS PAGE: Meditation and acupuncture at Chiva-Som. OPPOSITE PAGE: Yoga class at Chiva-Som.



He shows me a mirror and I look like a pin cushion with swollen eyes from crying. He then slowly removes each needle, convinced I look younger and suggesting a course of treatments for best results. Now, I know this works, I have seen it on other people, but it is definitely not a treatment for me. That said, as an emotional release it was completely liberating.

I want to escape from the treatment room, run to my bed and have a good cry. My stress levels have risen which can't have done anything for my adrenals, but a good steam, sauna and soak in the hot tub followed by a Thai massage helped me balance and, again, at least I wasn't thinking about food.

DAY FIVE

I wake this morning with no pain in my knee, none, nothing. It is the best it has felt in months. The fire acupuncture clearly worked and I am again singing the praises of Takeshi at breakfast. I have the first solid meal in five days on my last day of detox when it's back to prunes and apples again. The melatonin has also helped me sleep with no residual tiredness, just a natural sleep that finishes when it should.

Today I see Richard Currall. He is a healer at Chiva-Som who I have had the delight of meeting before. We are working on reducing

stress which seems to be my biggest issue when battling my health, my age and my weight. I have met my share of healers who clearly live in la la land. Richard thankfully does not, but apparently I do. He spends the hour simply talking to me in his soothing dulcet tones, laying his hand on my legs and my forehead where I feel an immense heat.

Don't ask me what he does or how it works, but it does and I feel the most relaxed I have all week, even after five daily massages. I even join the other guests for dinner in the restaurant, though I stick to my final detox meal of steamed fish.

DAY SIX

There is a spring in my step and I can feel my thickening middle thinning this morning. Who said you need high impact high adrenal exercise to lose weight? Detox plus yoga and morning beach walks have certainly been doing the trick.

Today I take my walk to the top of the temple at the end of Hua Hin beach, climbing stairs that raise my heart rate until I reach the bells on top and tap them for good luck and blessings. My energy levels are clearly rising.

Perhaps it is the knowledge I can choose from the à la carte menu today and no matter what I choose it is still going to be good for

me. I don't even want to binge, it is weird, I just want to eat light and healthy.

Plus I feel social again, I want to interact and talk with others and I am actually smiling. Surely that's taken years off my face alone?

DAY SEVEN

I see dolphins on my walk this morning. The sun rises on the horizon as a pod of them play in the water, their silhouettes rising and falling as they come up for air and dive back down again. As I keep walking they follow me, or so I tell myself, as they too make their way up the beach.

The Buddhist monks that walk this beach every morning to the temple are walking again today and their orange robes are especially vibrant.

I know I sound like a Hallmark card and I also know the monks haven't changed, it's me and no I haven't taken too much DHEA or Melatonin either. Simply taking time out to concentrate on relaxing, to not judge, to throw away guilt and to cleanse my mind of constant communication has been enough to make me see the world in front of me again.

Am I younger? Well my year of birth hasn't changed but I have a kindergarten style skip in my step. 🌿

need to know

WHAT:

Anti-ageing and integrative medicine retreat at Chiva-Som
www.chivasom.com

WHERE:

Hua Hin, Thailand

GETTING THERE:

Online booking agent Zuji have flights with major airlines and no booking fees from most Asian cities to Bangkok.
www.zuji.com

Stay at the Novotel Suvarnabhumi airport hotel in Bangkok for connecting transfers to Hua Hin by car or plane. The hotel has hourly package rates at jet lag recovery spa treatments.
www.novotelsuvarnabhumi.com



THIS PAGE: Thai massage at Chiva-Som.