





SPAS & RETREATS

Put your mind on pause as you enter a realm of sensory overload

Bathing Pavilion, Chiva-Som, Thailand

THAILAND

Like most Australians, my first experience of Thailand involved a backpack and Mekong whiskey. My university wage didn't extend to five-star spas—instead, I made do with \$5 massages at beachside locations.

The smiling faces of the Thai people were at first disconcerting for a middle-class girl from Sydney's North Shore. Few westerners smile in bustling metropolises, and I had taken on the modern girls' ability to look vacantly at the world before me. Being in Thailand meant dropping my guard and risking connection.

Nights were spent dancing on the beach by bonfire flame; days were devoted to soaking in azure waters on beaches so white they could have been chalk. I didn't need a millionaire's wallet to enjoy what was before me.

A return journey five years later, now on a full-time wage, meant I could afford air conditioning in my beachside bungalow and could finally step into the hushed halls of Thailand's lush spa retreats. One step and I was hooked. What has followed is a life of pounding, pampering, scrubbing, kneading, soaking and sanding in a perpetual quest for spa nirvana.

Thailand has long been spa mecca for those seeking solace in the human touch. Many make the pilgrimage to Thailand for the massage alone—a massage steeped in history, originating in India more than 2500 years ago.

The trade route of Thailand between India and China meant the word on Buddhism spread quickly from India and, with it, the beginnings of what would become Thai massage. Traditionally performed by Buddhist monks, it incorporates both the spirit and body.

Considering this history, it's no surprise that Thailand embraced the boom of the spa industry in the late '80s and early '90s, to become the spa capital of Asia.

Chiva-Som is a residential spa retreat on Thailand's Hua Hin coast. It's the Olympics of spas, equivalent to the Oscars for those wanting spa boasting rights. Anyone who thinks they're anyone has been here—from Kate Moss to Kylie to Posh and Becks. If you've got something to lose—be it kilos, wrinkles or heartache—then you can lose it here. The appeal of Chiva-Som is its five-star hotel status and beachfront location. No sharing rooms and group hugs so often found at other week-long health retreats. At Chiva-Som, it's all about me. I mean, you.

Guests choose one of 10 health retreats on offer. All are the same price, but each is tailored to a different need—from weight management to detox to yoga, spa, fitness, body tuning, personal discovery and golf.

All thinking is done for you—once you've chosen your retreat, your spa cuisine of three meals a day is adapted for you. A daily activities sheet is provided for each guest, and you choose your day's events.





Pangkor Laut

Pangkor Laut Resort, Thailand



From beachside to big city side... Bangkok is embracing the new trend of residential spas for the business traveller looking for time out from urban stress. I Sawan Residential Spa & Club at the city's Grand Hyatt is one of a growing number of five-star hotel spas offering overnight accommodation. Designed by New York darling Tony Chi, I Sawan sits on 'the fifth floor of heaven.' It's all pea gravel and hedges, with the scent of the landscaped frangipani trees hypnotising those who walk within.

Six spa cottages offer overnight accommodation, each featuring its own treatment room, separate bedroom, living room and bathroom. Guests need never enter any other part of the hotel—the fifth floor has its own reception area, a spa cuisine café, tennis court, squash courts, pool, spa treatment bungalows, landscaped gardens and fitness club.

But wait, there's more. In a rush for a meeting? Last-minute dinner invite? Get your coiffure fixed at the hair salon, a quick polish at the nail bar and voilà, you're a new woman. All this comes at a cost, so you'd better hope the company's picking up the bill or you'll be washing spa pans for a week.

For those not seeking a long retreat or an urban oasis, Thailand provides for all.

The big kahunas of spas reside in Thailand. Think Six Senses, Mandara, Angsana, Banyan Tree et al. If it can be buffed, steamed, exfoliated or waxed, it exists in Thailand.

This is also the home of exclusive Aman Resort's first spa retreat, Amanpuri, on the white sands of Phuket and the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi Spa in the jungle town of Chiang Mai. Thai spas are the recipients of the world's top spa awards, including the exclusive Spa Asia Crystal Awards, year after year.

On a recent trip to the south of Thailand, in an effort to regain my lost youth, I chose the spa treatment I first experienced on the side of the street in Koh Phi Phi. A simple raised platform supported a tiny Thai woman three times my age while I, fully clothed, was manipulated from head to toe. Soon the sound of traffic disappeared as I was lulled into a meditative state.

The good news was it cost me little more than it did 10 years ago, and I had enough change to book into the nearby Banyan Tree for a full facial and a mini-manicure. I'm saving now for the full Chiva-Som treatment in 2008 when its first country retreat promises to change the face of Thai spas, again.

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