

travel



Healing holidays

Unique locations and healing energies mean these wellness retreats soothe and restore mind, body and soul.

1. Spiritual sanctuary

The island of Samui in the Gulf of Thailand has long been favoured by Buddhist monks as a spiritual retreat. They believe it has a unique aura that enlightens their spiritual path and helps them connect better with the universe. The monks often stayed in natural caves on the island's steep jungle-clad hillsides. And it was one of these that Kamalaya Koh Samui co-founder John Stewart chanced upon during his own four-month pilgrimage to the island to treat recurring health problems. John and his wife Karina had also been looking for a site to establish a wellness retreat. He'd previously spent a year living as a yogi in a cave in India – so to him the monks' cave was a sign this was the place to build their dream. The cave remains the heart of Kamalaya, lending an aura of sacred energy to the retreat's beautiful natural surroundings. Its tastefully constructed buildings are dotted across the steep hillside amid lush tropical vegetation like an enchanted village, with panoramic views of the sea and outlying islands. It's a telling sign though that the best

views are reserved not for top-tier villa accommodation but for the wellness sanctuary itself. John says he never wanted Kamalaya to be a hotel with a spa; rather a wellness centre with rooms. Encompassing Western medicine, naturopathy and traditional Chinese medicine, there are more than 70 therapies and treatments on offer. Guests can select them à la carte or choose from a series of all-inclusive themed programs designed variously to inspire, restore balance or ensure optimal health in mind, body and spirit. Detox is a particular speciality, combining medical science and nutritional supplements with herbal remedies and alternative therapies. The restaurant and cafe even offer a range of low-allergy, low-inflammatory, low-GI vegetarian detox dishes among the wide variety of delicious Asian and Western fare. But because Kamalaya recognises that people sometimes crave indulgence, there are desserts too, ranging from healthy fruit to ice-cream and soufflés. This flexible approach to nutrition is typical of the retreat's holistic philosophy of wellness. Staff are there to encourage and inspire (never dictate), helping guests achieve their personal goals, whether that's simply

to enjoy a tranquil holiday with a little yoga thrown in, or to participate in a structured wellness program. To read associate editor Kieren Charteris' experience of Kamalaya Koh Samui, go to www.notebookmagazine.com/calendar.

2. Mountain magic

There's magic in the air at Rancho La Puerta, Mexico. The 1,200-hectare wellness resort lies at the foot of mystical Mount Kuchumaa, which local tribespeople call the 'exalted high place'. The 1,185-metre mountain was once a place of initiation for spiritual leaders. These days it continues to work its magic on visitors to Rancho La Puerta. Hikers who trek through the wild meadows and scrub-covered foothills to the summit at dawn are rewarded by vistas of huge granite boulders, seas of lilac, bright blue skies and fluffy white clouds. Some say the stark beauty clears their minds and they're reminded of what's really important in life. Others find their bliss elsewhere. Founded by health and fitness pioneers Edmond and Deborah Szekely in 1940, the ranch has a world-renowned program that's a mix of exercise, stretching, and relaxation – which ranges

from meditation and spa treatments to simply lounging in a shady hammock in the gardens. The resort's organic farm grows much of the healthy semi-vegetarian cuisine served in its dining hall as well as healing plants for its spa treatments.

3. Therapeutic waters

The thermal baths of San Casciano dei Bagni in Tuscany have been renowned for their therapeutic properties since the time of the ancient Etruscans. In Renaissance times, a thermal resort built by the ruling Medici family attracted visitors from the whole of Europe. Today the Medici residence has been expanded and turned into a five-star spa hotel called Fonteverde, with seven thermal pools of different sizes. Guests can simply bathe in the warm, mineral-rich waters to ease muscle aches and moisturise the skin, or select from more than 100 different spa treatments on

offer. The medieval villages, vineyards and olive groves of the surrounding Tuscan countryside are never far away. But you will be hard-pressed to find a better holiday experience than lounging in the hotel's indoor/outdoor infinity pool looking out over the rolling hills, especially at sunset.

4. Earth energy

From the moment you arrive at Gaia Retreat and Spa – nestled among green valleys and undulating hills near Byron Bay in northern NSW – you know you're in a special place. Singer Olivia Newton-John and her friend Gregg Cave, who co-own the property with two others, felt it when they first stumbled across the property while looking for a house for Gregg. Olivia, who had recently lost her mother, was so moved that she named the retreat Gaia or 'spirit of Mother Earth'. Aboriginal elders later told them the area was recognised

Meet the LOCAL

Aussie ex-pat Donna Wells is director of communications for Kamalaya Koh Samui in Thailand.



What do you love about living in Thailand? A different culture shows you other ways of experiencing life and helps you to understand what's important – and what's not.
Are there any downsides? It's hard to find a good latte; even harder to find a good waxing salon; and there are no great bookshops. The upsides more than make up for these things though.
What's so special about Koh Samui? There is a special energy here and much of the island interior is still untouched, beautiful nature.
What local attractions should visitors not miss? Get away from the main tourist areas and head to the south and west of the island. It's much quieter, less developed and far more beautiful.
What's the island's best-kept secret? Jazza Pizza, in Fisherman's Village, Bophut. Seriously good pizza and great coffee, too!
What should people staying at Kamalaya bring with them and what should they leave at home? Bring cool, comfortable and non-synthetic clothes. Leave your heels at home, and your laptop... if you can. It's fine to bring along your emotional baggage, because there's a very good chance you'll be leaving that with us when you depart!

as 'women's land' used for women's rituals and healing work. Two natural energy lines or 'song lines' intersect at the top of the hill, making it a place of great spiritual significance. Guests who start their day with yoga at the summit lookout often comment on this, as do those who choose just to relax and take in the breathtaking views. Olivia says this freedom to choose your activities is what the retreat's all about. "Maybe morning yoga or an afternoon of tennis or to just indulge in the spa treatments. For me, Gaia provides a spiritual environment to relax and rejuvenate."

Useful websites

- www.kamalaya.com.
- www.gaia retreat.com.au.
- www.fonteverdespa.com.
- www.rancholapuerta.com.
- www.healinghotelsoftheworld.com.