

A Place to Reconnect

Kamalaya Koh Samui's new Comprehensive Optimal Fitness Programme shapes
you into the best version of yourself

Writer Stephanie Shiu





THIS PAGE: Ocean view suites panoramas; garden pool superior suites are perfect for unwinding. OPPOSITE PAGE: A beautiful day at Kamalaya's lower pool

Wellness' is bandied around a lot these days, an umbrella term referring to healthy lifestyle choices. With well-being high in demand, retreats promising to pave the path to a new you have cropped up everywhere, many with a promising aesthetic but not necessarily any substance. What sets Kamalaya apart from other resorts boasting chic architecture and luxurious treatments is its tangibly holistic approach to mind, body and spirit.

The latest Comprehensive Optimal Fitness programme launched in December 2015 does just that, incorporating not only one-on-one training, but also personal mentoring and nutrition consultation to

address every part of the psyche. The aim is not only to improve fitness and whittle down the measurements taken upon arrival, but to improve well-being at the cellular level, introduce relaxation techniques and encourage living more mindfully. While the swaying palm trees and dreamy breeze are idyllic, it's also a place people in dire need of an overhaul come to heal.

Most importantly it's tailored just for you, so regardless of athletic ability, the programme is personalised to suit your needs. For example, due to limited time, Kamalaya was able to condense what should have been a seven-day programme into six, making it more intense than usual. There is also the option to do 10 days.

DAY 1

First things first – a nurse will record your weight, height and blood pressure before doing a Bioimpedance body composition analysis (BIA) to measure your body composition electronically. A normal distribution of tissue and fluid is associated with immunity and longevity, and an abnormal with disease and ageing. Providing more than just basal metabolic rate and body mass index, it also offers fascinating insight into cell integrity.

A wellness consultation with Amel, the expert who will be looking after me during the stay, takes place afterwards, and she addresses my lifestyle, health concerns and goals for the stay. The key indicators

of cellular health is the phase angle measurement, which can be a predictor of disease, and body capacitance, indicating the amount of energy stored in the body and how effectively. For my age, my phase angle number is lower than desirable which is a bit of an eye opener. Perhaps I need this retreat more than I realised.

Next is the holistic fitness evaluation, in which lovely personal trainer Boy tests my flexibility, how many sit-ups and push-ups I

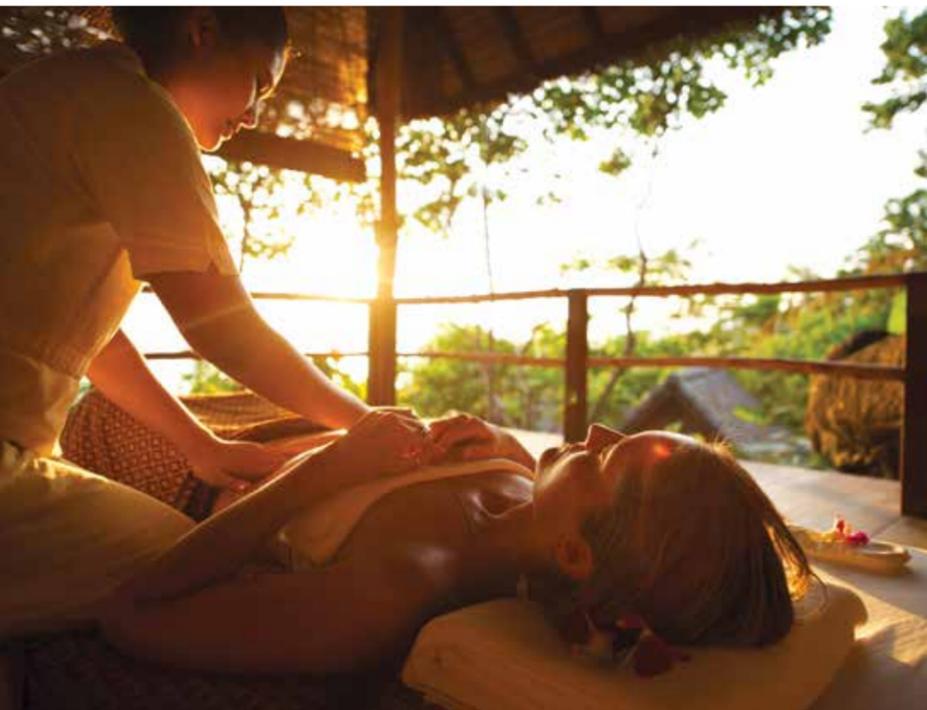
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can do in a minute, and my rate of recovery after a bike ride, so that a plan of action can be drawn up based on my objectives to tone up, lose fat and learn how to use some of the more ominous-looking gym equipment.

The first training session consisted of a treadmill warm-up, sit-ups with medicine ball, bicep curls, dumbbell rows, tricep extensions, and oblique work with resistance bands and core work using a Swiss ball. This ends with a stretch session and 30 minutes in the Far infrared sauna, which is said to ease aches and pains, reduce inflammation, stimulate circulation, metabolism, immunity and detoxification. An electrolyte drink is given before and after slot to replenish lost minerals.

For those who find it a challenge to tear themselves away from their phones, the half-





THIS PAGE: Pampered in paradise; the property's lotus flowers offer serenity. OPPOSITE PAGE: Yoga teacher Ann in her element

spoke highly of her supportive colleagues, who are equally invested in holistic health.

To wind down for the evening, the daily infrared sauna was followed by an Asian foot massage using pressure points to activate nerve reflexes and stimulate specific organs and tissues for a good night's sleep. This was followed by a hand massage inspired by Korean acupuncture to open energy channels and release stress and old emotional patterns. Another successful day – life at Kamalaya is too easy to get used to.

DAY 3

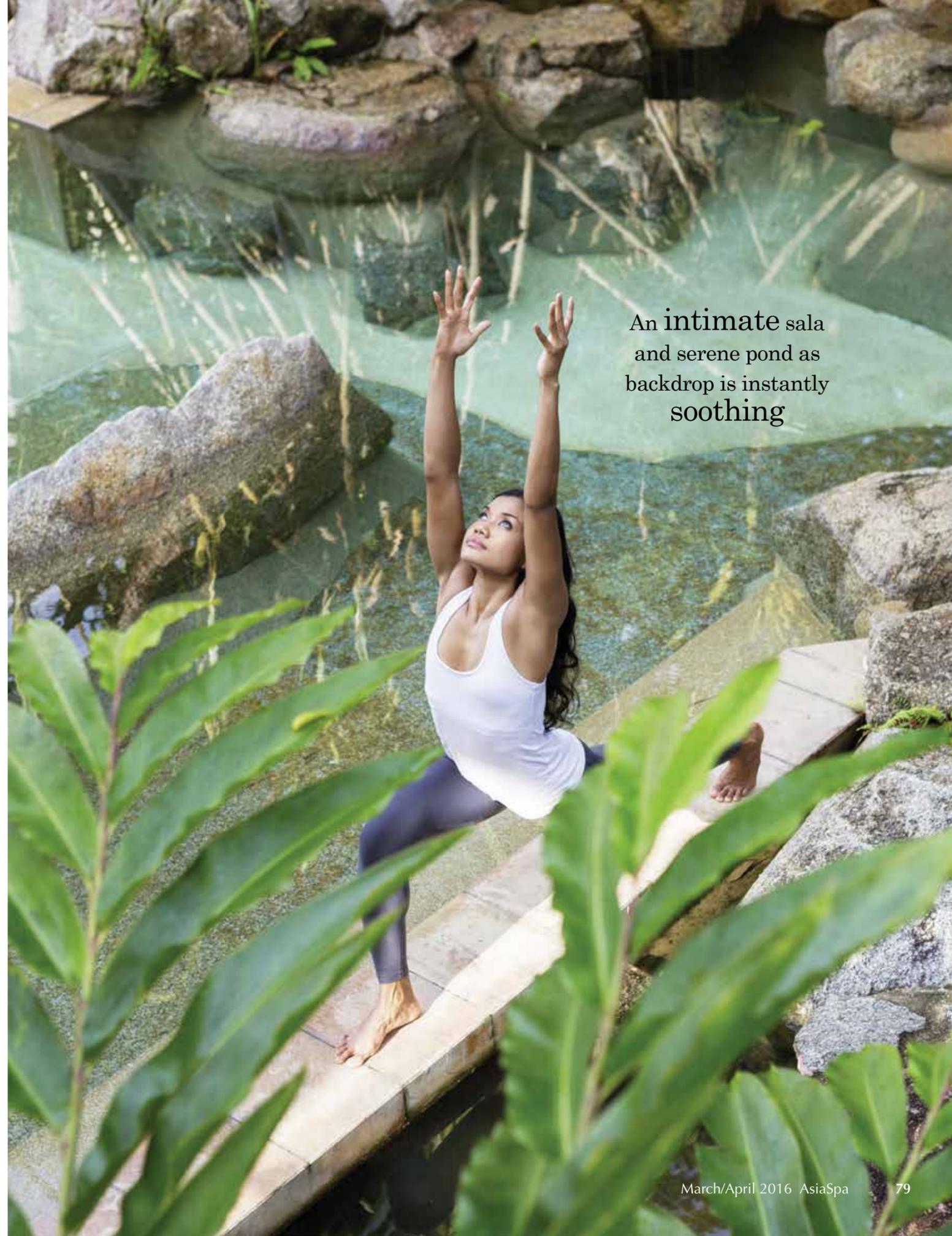
In my nutrition consultation, Amel assesses eating habits and provides pointers on fuelling the week's exercise regime the

hour sauna stint is a good introduction to the Kamalaya pace of life – where televisions are non-existent and complimentary Wi-Fi is provided for only an hour each day to encourage guests to reconnect with themselves. Admittedly one of them, I am surprised how quickly I get used to enjoying my own company. At the end of the exercise in patience, I am rewarded with a 90-minute Vital Essence Oil Massage, combining Asian energy principles and aromatherapy, grateful to be utterly spoilt.

DAY 2

This morning's personal training session begins with a cross trainer warm-up and dumbbell exercises using heavier weights, focusing on chest and shoulders. Immediately after is an hour-long reformer Pilates session to strengthen the core and learn to engage the right muscle groups, which requires slow and steady concentration.

A private afternoon yoga class takes place in an intimate sala with a serene pond as backdrop that is immediately soothing. The session with Ann sums up the programme's approach to the careful balance of the physical, mental and spiritual, with the focus as much about breathing and letting go as perfecting postures. Ann's passion shone through in this memorable session and she



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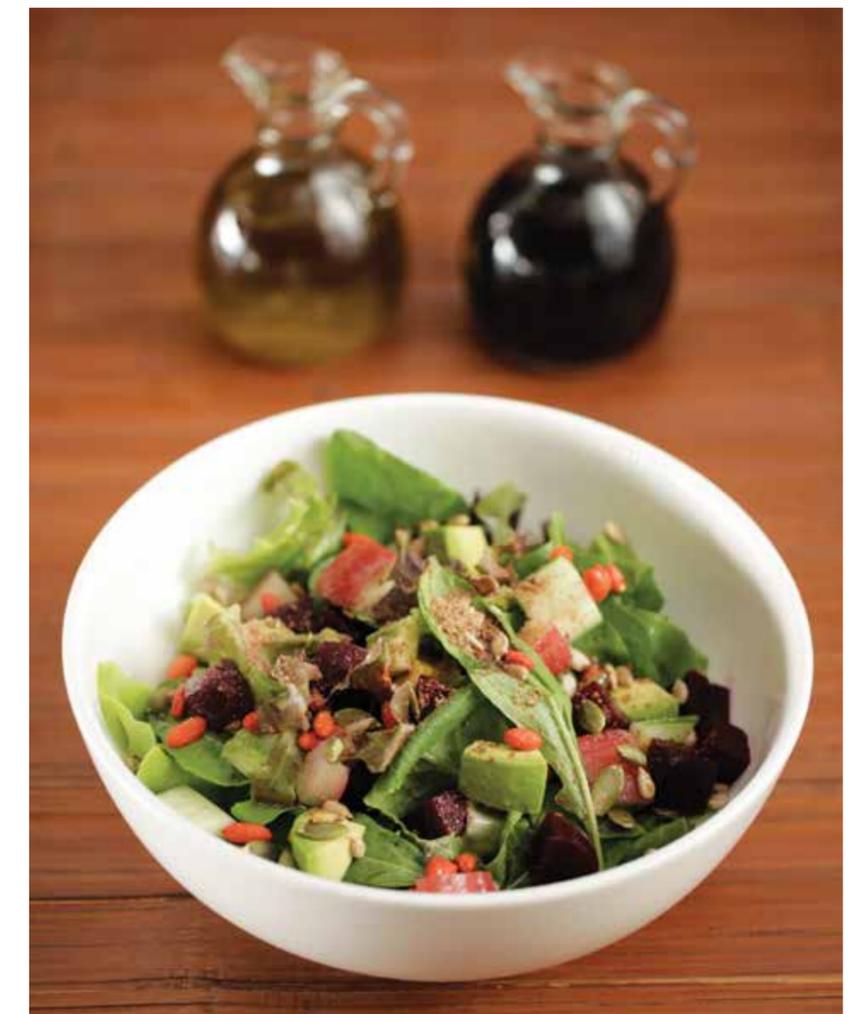
THIS PAGE: The colourful detox garden salad. OPPOSITE PAGE: Thinking time in the Leela steam room; healthy and adorable cucumber sushi

have taken with Kamalaya, paying no attention to the competition and instead turning the focus inwards and making their own mark on the world. Incorporating experiences from years in the Himalayas to their affinity with ancient cultures and spiritual practices, this is what makes the retreat inimitable. She says, “Just like an artist paints, a potter sculpts or a chef creates a dish, it comes from within. You have to look inside yourself to express something truly authentic and unique.”

Interested to hear my feedback, Karina is very open to guest recommendations. She also probes further when hearing that my fat percentage is on the higher side

of average, asking “Do you like sugar?” Busted. There’s no hiding my sweet tooth, an addiction she too has overcome. “It’s more addictive than crack cocaine,” she tells me. It’s not fat (at least the good kind) that concerns her, but inflammation, which is caused by an excess of carbohydrates. Though quitting cold turkey is not always realistic, she makes it more manageable by suggesting I eat only half of my dessert. Advice to ponder as I make my way to the sauna, which has become my new thinking place.

Ensuring the mind is catered for as much as the body, an hour of personal mentoring with Rajesh Ramani, banker



right way. She recommends supplements, clean protein and healthy fats, and explains how travel can affect hormones and sleep patterns. With this in mind, I attack the healthy breakfast spread – think wheatgrass shots, buckwheat pancakes, chia seed bread and nut milks. While detoxing guests choose from options in their dedicated section of the menu, or items from the buffet clearly marked ‘detox-friendly’, those on fitness plans can include protein.

I sampled from both menus and can attest that the detox offerings were equally flavourful. From mung bean ‘pasta’ in Thai basil pesto to roasted pumpkin and sunflower seed dumplings in coconut cream and rocket, there’s zero sense of deprivation. From the regular menu, favourites included seared cod with wasabi mash and scallops with sautéed

mushroom, spinach and tahini, which are free from unhealthy oils and MSG. You will also never find anything deep-fried or microwaved. The desserts, especially the dairy-free chocolate mousse with shredded coconut, tasted as divine as the conventional version.

More wholesome hedonism comes in the form of a Royal Ayurvedic Massage in which warm medicated oil is slathered over body and hair, with rhythmic kneading to boost circulation and provide calm. Being pampered so early puts me in a relaxed frame of mind in time for lunch with Karina Stewart, founder, brand and concept director of Kamalaya, who is a Master of Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine – and a complete fountain of knowledge.

Karina tells me about the ‘Blue Ocean Strategy’ that she and her husband John

turned monk turned before his current role, is a wonderful opportunity to identify any potential obstacles affecting my goals. We focus on decision making and he urges me to question my driving forces, and what to ask myself before embarking down any path. He tells me growth and contribution to the community is the way towards fulfillment.

Feeling motivated, I head to round three of personal training, where I get to grips with all the gym equipment in a circuit incorporating each. The hour of work is rewarded with an hour of super-stretch an assisted treatment performed on a matt in the gym combining Thai massage and yoga to relieve muscle tension and improve flexibility, all while watching the sunset over the Gulf of Thailand. If only all workouts ended this way...

DAY 4

The less physically challenging activities are demanding in a different way. A pranayama session with Rajesh proves how much I have to learn about basic breathing. After telling him about my inability to sit still and difficulty sleeping, he recommends two exercises to help with relaxation and centering. I soon discover that basic throat breathing is not that basic, taking what

feels like a lifetime to master. Only then am I ready to attempt *ujjayi* breathing. Instantly calmer, I understand why Rajesh recommends this in the early morning to avoid getting ready in a flurry which is the usual way my day starts.

The next technique, *nadi shodhana*, or alternate nostril breathing, helps to purify and strengthen the nervous system also takes practice. As I leave Rajesh's office he tells me, "Try to walk slower. I saw you earlier and I think it will be better for you." An intention to set for the day as I leave his office, careful to take my time with every step, reminding myself that Kamalaya is no place for hurrying.

After telling Rajesh that the sauna has been the most challenging aspect of the programme due to my tendency to occupy every spare minute with some form of distraction, he tells me about his experience as a monk, enduring days in a sealed dark room fasting, with only three glasses of sugar water a day as sustenance. Ok Rajesh, you win. This puts things in perspective and today's sauna session seems to fly by since I have the luxury of a book to pass the time.

Thanks to this morning's breathing techniques, I am well prepped for the intensity needed for Pilates, as well as the last killer reps of personal training. In my

session with Klack, we concentrate on functional exercises like squats to overhead press, walkout to push-up, Swissball jackknife and too many donkey kicks to count. Demanding yet kind, he puts in as much stretch time afterwards as the session itself, which I imagine would make any gym-goer envious. It almost makes me feel guilty that I still have a 90-minute traditional Thai massage to follow, combining more stretching with pressure point techniques to stimulate blood flow and maintain suppleness. 'Almost' being the operative word, as I leave feeling like I'm floating on a cloud.

DAY 5

Meeting with Rajesh has become the way to start the day, offering much food for thought. This session we focus on looking beyond the self through connection. A conversation that started about decision-making has evolved into defining my own life philosophy and striving towards growth, fulfillment and contribution, after which he says everything else will fall into place. His personal philosophy is simply "to live" which inspires me to create my own.

Everyone is the same, Rajesh reminds me. We all want human interaction and our sense of worth is measured in these terms. Even people perceived to be pillars of strength need connection. He recalls being incredibly moved when an old childhood friend reaches out to connect, remembering their friendship at school so many years ago. He encourages me to sit down with my loved ones a few times a week and just be present, free from distraction, and really tune into their emotions.

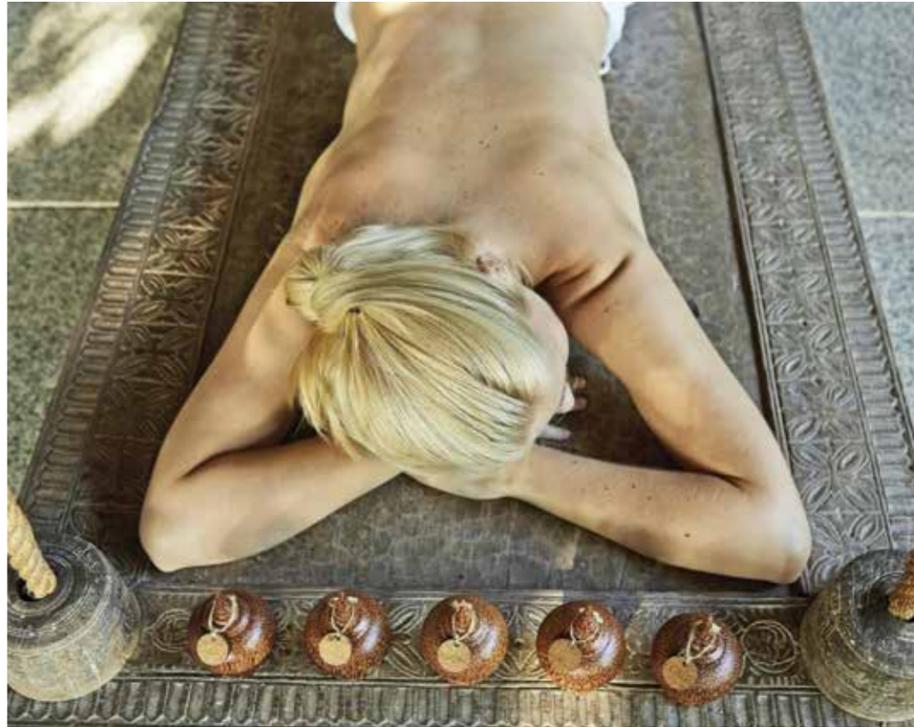
Today's sauna session flies by, I barely looked at the clock at all with my nose buried in a book. I'm not sure if it was because Rajesh's monk story toughened me up, or if I'm becoming used to the heat, but either way it says a lot about my new state of mind. In the last personal training session, Boy notices that I am breathing with more



THIS PAGE: Gorgeous surrounds for group meditation. OPPOSITE PAGE: One of many breathtaking Samui sunsets

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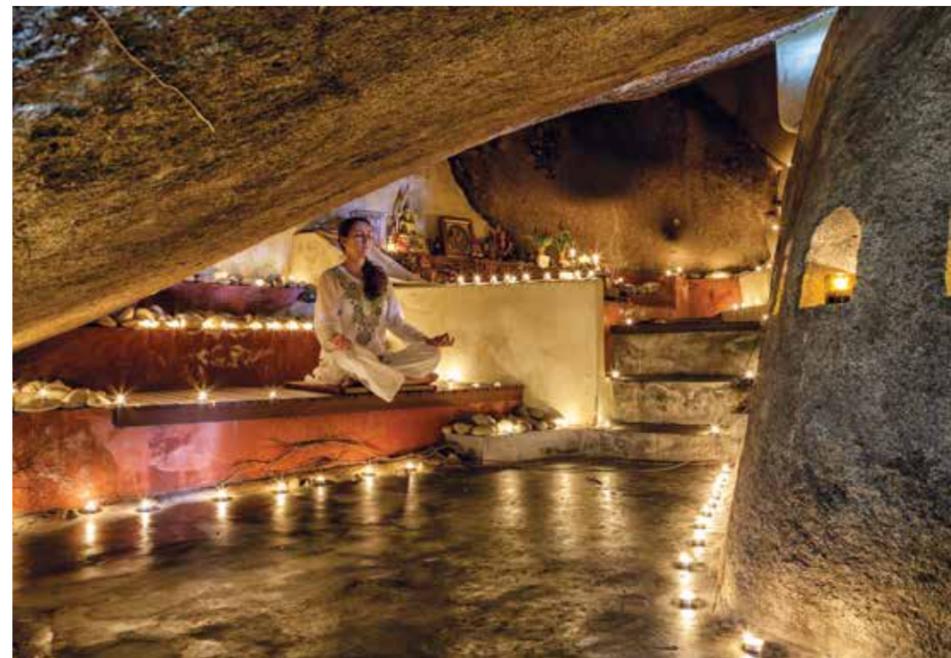
control, and makes this one count with more weight and reps.

Boy warns me that the afternoon aqua exercise may be a challenge. I can't quite understand how it could be harder than anything else we've done, but as I've learnt, things I think will be easy usually are not. Turns out he was right of course. From 'running' lengths of the lap pool, to jumping continuously over a styrofoam noodle underwater, and balancing weights under my knees using only my arms to get from one end to the other, it was thoroughly exhausting but in the most hysterical way. The cool water gives the illusion you are hardly breaking a sweat, and though wrinkled as a prune, have never laughed harder.

Today's massage is traditional Thai with a herbal compress, containing a blend of herbs to open energy pathways, while calming the mind. As usual I head to dinner blissed out, joined by a lady I met in the changing room who also happens to be from Hong Kong. A high-powered fashion executive, she tells me how her professional pressure has affected her relationship. We joke about how back home you would

We all want human interaction and our sense of worth is measured in these terms

THIS PAGE: Treating the senses; the spiritual heart of Kamalaya. OPPOSITE PAGE: The fitness centre's inviting lap pool



never strike up a conversation with a stranger, but the sense of community here makes it natural. As we swap stories and make plans to meet after returning home, I smile thinking about Rajesh's advice this morning. Human connection really is everything.

DAY 6

I savour every minute of the last day, which begins with a private yoga session with Bowie, who after discussing my goals for the class, decides that strength will be our focus. Her laugh may be infectious, but she means business and we spend a lot of time in plank and doing elbow walks. She accompanies every pose correction with a detailed explanation and correcting

hyperextensions which vastly improves my foundation of the basics.

It's time to compare measurements from the first day, though I can already attest to efficacy of the programme even before doing so. I lost a few pounds and centimetres off my waist, though gained around both thighs thanks to all those squats. I feel stronger, more toned and best of all, centred and at peace.

A day at Kamalaya without a massage would be incomplete, and the Marma point massage which works on 107 pressure points is a perfect way to close, a cocoon of harmony and nourishment. This sums up the way I have felt the whole time. While the spa and idyllic surrounds are a joy, what makes this sanctuary so special is its

welcoming heart and soul, and genuinely warm people.

It's the only resort I have visited where the guests smile at one another, chat to their neighbour at meals, and make those travelling alone feel at ease and included. Everyone at Kamalaya wants more than just a holiday, they arrive with an open mind, eager to embark on a journey of self-discovery. I initially came with a physical goal, but the retreat ended up being so much more. It has given me a taste of true wellness – slowing down, being grounded, focusing with purpose and taking a well-rounded approach to health. To call it a game-changer would be an understatement – it's a new way of life.

www.kamalaya.com