



Return to *Paradise*

By Claire Locking

Kamalaya on Koh Samui's South Coast is a little slice of paradise ready to heal and nurture even the most stressed out urbanite.

As I jump off my flight at Koh Samui airport, surely one of the world's most charming with its open-sided passenger buses, thatched pavilions and rows of frangipani trees, it seems my fellow passengers aren't yet in holiday mood. The line that snakes towards immigration is full of stooped figures, all staring at a phone or iPad screen, no doubt catching up on essential emails or updating their status on Facebook.

Not so at my final destination, Kamalaya, the renowned wellness sanctuary on the island's quiet south coast; here the use of modern communications is politely discouraged in favour of reconnecting with nature, your body and soul.

The lack of resort-wide WiFi is one of several modern conveniences that Kamalaya has deliberately decided to leave off the menu. There are no TVs in the rooms, no mini bar stocked with KitKats – in fact, there's no bar. The idea is that deliberate distractions are removed so that you can reconnect with the finer things in life: nature, beauty, health and wellbeing.

It helps that Kamalaya is as far away from the nightclubs and lady boys of Chaweng that you can get. Situated around a sandy, rock-lined bay, it has a touch of Peter Pan's Neverland about it. The 59 villas and suites are dotted across a grassy hillside, some perched precariously on top of giant granite boulders, others almost hanging from the towering palm trees above.

Paths and stepping-stones lead under dramatically draped Spanish moss and over lotus ponds and waterfalls down to a sand-covered cove. Every corner you turn there's a hammock to doze on or a quiet space to admire the views. Even Kamalaya's visiting insect life seems to be drunk on the resort's unique elixir; huge, vibrant butterflies rest on lotus flowers, giant bees swarm around turquoise blue orchids and at night, bullfrogs sing you to sleep.

While the lost boys of Neverland refused to grow up, the inhabitants of Kamalaya are similarly here to escape their grown-up realities. It's a place where guests come to take a step back,



to forget the deadlines and the long "to do" lists and instead rest their minds and nurture their bodies.

As well as allowing guests to relax and renew, Kamalaya also aims to help guests realise life's potential through education, advice and guidance. Every stay at Kamalaya begins with a wellness consultation with a qualified and genuinely concerned naturopath. The lovely Didi from South Africa studied my Body Bioimpedance Analysis (BIA) – and no doubt my deep frown lines – and deduced that a good dose of relaxation was the order of my stay. My Relax and Renew wellness programme allowed me to eat à la carte, but Didi suspected I was suffering from some digestive disorders so she advised me to choose from the detox menu and stay clear of fruit that was high in sugar, replacing it with protein at every meal.

At this point, my previously blissful state took a turn south; detox sounded more like deprivation and for me, a lover of good food, it was sure to be something of a battle. I was pleasantly surprised, however: "detox" at Kamalaya could well be translated as "delicious".



The resort follows the principle that food is medicine, so every dish uses the highest quality ingredients, fresh and organic whenever possible. There's no unnecessary processing, additives, preservatives, artificial flavourings or colouring. For my first lunch at the beachside Amrita Café, I chose a garden salad with wasabi dressing, grilled black cod and refreshing coconut water, the natural nutritious wonder of the tropics. Fellow guests not restricted to detox were happily tucking in to local Thai delicacies and grilled lamb or ostrich steaks. Calorie counting is out, replaced with a healthy respect for eating only what's natural and nutritious.

After lingering long over lunch, I wandered down to the beach and watched local fishermen wading out through the lagoon to the reef beyond. Some fellow guests were doing a tai chi class on the sand as the sun began to fade. The absolute silence, coming from the chaotic energy and pace of Hong Kong, was slightly unnerving but I could almost feel the stresses and strains of life easing away.

The following day I had my first experience of the Wellness Sanctuary where the magic of Kamalaya really happens. The team of 70 therapists and their healing hands pummel and ease away guests stresses and strains with therapies including Chi Nei Tsang, a Thai abdominal massage exclusively available in Koh Samui at Kamalaya. Even my simple sounding head massage had incredibly restorative powers, hardly surprising when it took place in an open treatment pavilion high up in the trees with calming sea breezes, the sound of birdsong outside and sea vistas beyond.

Along with the team of therapists, the sanctuary has a revolving team of visiting practitioners specialising in everything from face reading to blue light energy healing. I was privileged to spend two inspirational hours in the company of Rajesh Ramani, one of Kamalaya's resident practitioners and a spiritual teacher. His Mastering Relationships workshop held in the resort's gallery was





Fact File

Kamalaya offers nine different wellness programmes of broad wellness goals from Detox to Stress and Burnout. Guests can also tailor a programme specific to their needs. For further details, visit www.kamalaya.com or email info@kamalaya.com. We flew to Koh Samui direct on Bangkok Airways; for flights, schedules and bookings, visit www.bangkokair.com

enlightening, informative and offered me a new perspective on life.

Time moves slowly at Kamalaya, whether you decide to fill your day (there is something organised almost every hour including yoga classes, morning power walks, meditation workshops or cooking classes) or whether you prefer, like me, to just wallow in the fact that the unique environment has allowed you to press the pause button on your life for a while.

I had some of the best night's sleeps of my life here, aided perhaps by my vast sea-view villa with its enormous high-ceilinged open-plan space, expansive balcony complete with two day beds, and sublime ocean views and bathroom, open to the elements come rain or shine; even monsoon rain is seen as a positive at Kamalaya – apparently it's incredibly invigorating and good for the soul.

Kamalaya may be a wellness retreat but it seems to have combined that USP with just enough luxury to make the experience decadent as well as

restorative. The reason for this perfect balance might be in the combination of life experiences of the founders, Karina, a master in traditional Chinese medicine, John, who spent 16 years devoted to a life of service and spiritual studies in the Himalayas, and Marc-Antoine, a Swiss hospitality management professional.

Together they must have looked into a crystal ball, as when Kamalaya opened its doors back in 2003, the world had not yet been thrust into fast-forward by the use of modern communications. A decade on and as the speed of everyday life is continually moving up a gear, so more and more of us need these magical places to stop and rest a while.

When co-founder John Stewart first met his yogi master in the jungles of the northern Himalayas, he was greeted with a slap in the face and a question, "What took you so long?" After four days at Kamalaya I look in the mirror and see a refreshed, revitalised, healthier me looking back and I ask myself that very same question. **31**

