

HARPER'S BAZAAR

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Harper's BAZAAR

EDITED BY FRANCES HIBBARD

ESCAPE

Island GIRLS

Yasmin Le Bon is charmed by Hamilton Island; plus exotic Zanzibar; the romantic Seychelles; lounging on Lizard; privacy in Phuket; and soul searching on Samui

Model Yasmin Le Bon wearing Little Joe Woman, at Qualia, Hamilton Island, Queensland.

NICK SCOTT, STYLED BY ROMY FRYDMAN, HAIR AND MAKEUP BY NONI SMITH AT THE ARTIST GROUP. SEE BUYLINES FOR DETAILS AND STOCKISTS



Luxuriate in chic yet cosy rooms at Kamalaya.

SOUL SEARCHER KAMALAYA, THAILAND

Far from the madding crowds that flock to the picturesque Thai island of Koh Samui — away from the tourist-resort hordes of Chaweng or the Full Moon Party devotees hanging around the Fisherman's Village — sits a five-star sanctuary that is quite unlike any other health destination on earth.

When the Kamalaya Wellness Sanctuary & Holistic Spa opened in 2005, it forced other famous spa resorts across Asia to rethink their own approach. Its Destination Spa of the Year win at the AsiaSpa Awards last year is telling: these days, resort guests want far more than run-of-the-mill luxe massages and facials, deckchairs by the pool and cocktails. People expect a little spiritual bang from their holiday buck, and Kamalaya, which means Lotus Realm in the ancient language of Sanskrit, delivers.

The resort is set on a steep hillside that makes for spectacular views (not to mention satisfyingly sore thigh muscles at the end of each day), its design award-nominated villas and common areas melding around granite boulders, waterfalls and ancient jungle trees overlooking a pristine ocean lagoon in Koh Samui's isolated south.

Kamalaya has everything you'd expect from a luxurious getaway, sure, but it's the natural cave at the heart of this retreat, and what it represents, that makes this place very, very different. Thanks to its intangible energetic lure, Buddhist monks have been visiting the cave to meditate for centuries, which may explain why almost every guest who comes here to pamper their outside parts ends up having some kind of internal healing too.

Co-founders John and Karina Stewart, the other reason for this sanctuary's rapid success, have dedicated much of their adult lives to serving others. Mexico-born Karina, a graduate of Princeton University in the US, turned down Stanford's offer of a prestigious MBA spot



Kamalaya Wellness Sanctuary & Holistic Spa, Koh Samui, Thailand.

"It's all about nourishing yourself into health rather than punishing, dieting, and calorie counting."



The resort's inviting lap pool, among verdant palms.

to instead study for her Masters degree in Traditional Chinese Medicine. Before making his fortune as an art dealer, her equally charismatic husband, John, spent 16 years studying under a yogi master in India, living most of that time as a monk. (The full version of their personal stories is so incredible it's almost implausible.)

"John and I knew from the beginning we were not creating the kind of place that was just for yoga or weight loss — we

called it a cauldron for transformation," says Karina, who has also developed holistic detoxification programs for esteemed medical clinics in the US.

"Our society is very successful at teaching us how to make money, but it doesn't teach us how to have balance, which is also required to have real happiness," John adds. "We've created a place where it's safe to let go, and that guides you into an inner journey."

COURTESY OF KAMALAYA

Kamalaya's wellness centre boasts 70 treatments on its menu, blending the best of Western therapies (including homeopathy, massage and even a calorie-blasting far-infrared sauna, which is hellish but effective), Eastern treatments (such as acupuncture, ayurveda) and some more esoteric offerings (sound healing, reiki). And of course there's a slew of activities such as yoga, meditation, fit-ball sessions, hiking and a fitness centre complete with an in-house kickboxing instructor if you want to go hard-core.

Not surprisingly, most guests are women aged 30–50 (although the 35 per cent male guest contingent is much higher than the industry standard). "They know they're stressed — they're working too much, drinking too much, not eating well and need to restart," Karina says. "And stress in young women especially worries me because of its impact on hormones and fertility." Whatever the motivation for being there, help comes in the form of wellness programs, in combination with the resort's thoughtfully designed cuisine. Rest assured it's not all mung beans and broccoli. Guests wanting to detox stick to special, but still delicious, vegan meals, and for the rest of us there's a vast menu with the likes of organic eggs, shellfish, lamb, buckwheat croissants, coffee, organic wine and unbelievably tasty yet healthy desserts. "It's all about

nourishing yourself into health, rather than punishing, dieting and calorie counting, which is not what we're about," says Karina, setting the resort apart from other retreats that offer a rigid program and boot camp-like regimen.

"People come on the fitness or optimal-weight programs and lose weight, or the detox, which isn't a weight-loss program, and lose weight too," she says. They also sleep better, look better, feel better and think better by the time they leave. As proof, one male guest there during my stay, an Hermès merchandising manager from Paris, tells me he's lost almost 8 kilograms in two weeks. Another already-slim Aussie guest, who co-owns a well-known surfboard and fashion company, admits she's lost 3 kilograms on her 10-day detox without much struggle.

The greatest benefits from this place lie in the "intangibles", as Karina calls them — the inner transformations that happen when people take care of their bodies, silence the white noise in their heads and think about what really matters in life.

But don't take my word for it — Oscar-winning director Oliver Stone wrote it best in the guest book: "The days went by and the weight came off. Thanks for helping show me the way, spiritual and physical ... I look forward to returning soon to paradise." — Rachel Sharp www.kamalaya.com.



Kilindi terrace, Zanzibar.

EXOTIC CREATURE ZANZIBAR, AFRICA

Zanzibar. The name suggests exoticism; it's hard to pronounce without hearing the ripple of a sitar, the swish of a magic wand. Zanzibar is an archipelago of islands off the coast of Tanzania, a cluster of gems in the sapphire Indian Ocean.

These sultry and verdant islands were a nexus in colonial times for the spice trade (and, indeed for slave trading). The port, Stone Town, still bears witness to a decadent past, with crumbling grand buildings, rusting ironwork balconies and an air redolent with history: tall ships, and swashbuckling traders whose fortunes were made and lost on the whim of the weather, the turn of the tide. Across the island, the scent of cloves and vanilla mingles with frangipani, the tang of sea salt on the breeze and the sounds of birdsong to create the atmosphere that makes Zanzibar unique.

Zanzibar was once a secret hideaway for the hippie generation, and has always offered the romance of dhow finishing, Creole cooking and a glimpse at the colour of Africa. Now it is a favourite of the glamorous cognoscenti too, the ideal place to relax and let your soul sing.

The idyll is reached, in true adventuring style, on a Cessna single-propeller plane. The view is thrilling: white beaches and an emerald heart where spice plantations still flourish. Even the airport looks as if it has been built for a film set. A derelict colonial building gathers dust and shadows to one side, and the action takes place in a corrugated-iron and breezeblock shed, where our luggage returns not by conveyor-belt, but on old teak spice chests — relics of the past. ▶