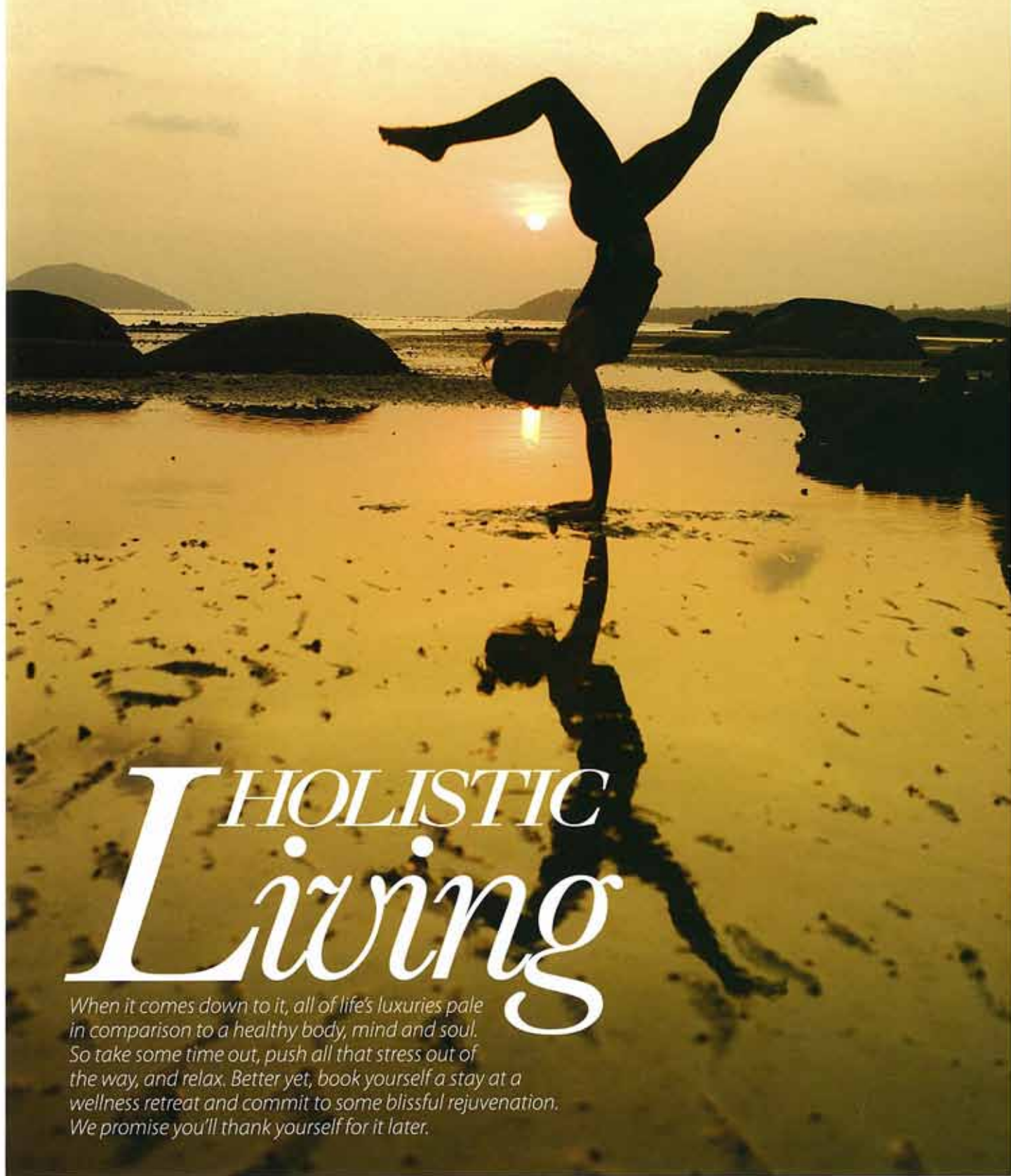


Designaire

DESIGN & LIVING



HOLISTIC *Living*

When it comes down to it, all of life's luxuries pale in comparison to a healthy body, mind and soul. So take some time out, push all that stress out of the way, and relax. Better yet, book yourself a stay at a wellness retreat and commit to some blissful rejuvenation. We promise you'll thank yourself for it later.



INDEPENDENCE

What do you get when you put a Fashion Editor on a mission to journey up north to find independence, rebalance her life and conquer her childhood fears in five days? ALICIA TAN braves Koh Samui by herself to find out.

If someone had told me two months ago that I'd be spending my 29th birthday alone in a foreign country to go on a wellness retreat, I'd have laughed in their faces. I might be a year shy of the big 3-0, but the concept of dining alone has never been something that I could do, let alone go on a holiday for five days with only my iPod for company. It doesn't sound too convincing that the only time I had a 'holistic' experience was meditating while waiting in line during peak hour to pay for my purchases at the bookstore.

Two weeks prior to my trip, I had a mini anxiety attack and was obsessively checking TripAdvisor.com to see if any negative feedback

had been written about the resort I was staying at, Zilch. All I found were rave reviews on how beautiful Kamalaya Resort was and endless tales of how their experience changed their lives. By then, my interest was piqued and the idea of a work-free holiday (did I mention for five full days?) was too good to resist.

Situated at the southern coastline of Koh Samui, Thailand, Kamalaya is an award-winning wellness sanctuary and holistic spa that integrates ancient and contemporary healing traditions into a menu of over 70 services. As a guest, you can choose a la carte services, embark on individual wellness programs or join a group retreat. The extensive list of treatments borrow practices from traditional

Chinese medicine, Western naturopathy, herbal medicine, homeopathy, Ayurvedic treatments and touch on sound, emotional and spiritual healing. There's a wellness program for anyone and everyone and can range from three to 10 days, depending on the individual's needs.

A week before departing, a Skype conversation was arranged between myself and one of Kamalaya's naturopaths in order for her to better understand my health history and start initial discussions on my personal goals. I was initially leaning towards their signature detox program but since I was still recovering from a recent cold, the naturopath advised against it and recommended trying a relaxing program

DAY

instead. Post-conversation, I made sure to read up on more of the wellness programs that Kamalaya offered. Their Asian Bliss program caught my eye, especially since many of the treatments were new to me and seemed suited to my assignment brief – to relax, renew and realign my chakras.

UP, UP & AWAY

Finally the day of my trip arrived and although I was still a little nervous (travel anxiety), I was looking forward to some quiet downtime. I was on an evening flight out and arrived in Koh Samui Airport at 8:30pm local time. A nice four-wheel drive picked me up from the airport and my driver informed me that it'd

take approximately 45 minutes to arrive at my destination. It was too dark to take in the island's surroundings, but it was pretty easy to determine that Koh Samui was a laidback beach town. Before long, we arrived at the resort and it was then I understood what all that hype on Kamalaya was about. Overlooking the coastline, Kamalaya was a resort designed to integrate into its surrounding natural landscape. A little interesting fact about the resort that I read about was that at the heart of Kamalaya is a cave that once served Buddhist monks as a place of meditation and spiritual retreat. That immediately explained the tranquility that washed over me as I stepped into the reception area and took in the rustic interiors.

The check-in process was fuss-free and I was then brought to my sea-view villa on a buggy. Following a quick tour around the villa (top points to the king-size bed with a full view of the lush tropical vegetation and outdoor bathroom), I was also provided with a welcome pack and informed that my wellness consultation will begin at 10:30am at

the Wellness Centre. Left to my own devices, I did another quick tour around the room (more points given to a healthy supper spread prepared without request) and made myself at home.

I hadn't realised how exhausted I was and after a quick bite and bed-time preparation, I was fast asleep.





DAY 1 Getting Acquainted

There are many firsts in one's life. Mine? Almost a decade into a career where half of my time is spent travelling and sleeping in hotels with lights and the television on, I actually went to bed the previous night in complete darkness and silence. It could have been due to exhaustion, but I had high hopes that I was becoming one with Mother Nature.

Before my wellness consultation, I decided on an early breakfast at one of Kamalaya's two restaurants, Soma. The buffet spread that greeted me looked so scrumptious that I was tempted to try everything possible. At the back of my mind, I was also wondering how people managed to stay slim and fit eating the cuisine laid out before my eyes. I decided on scrambled eggs from the a la carte menu and a selection of fresh tropical fruits. One of the chefs urged me to try their signature wheatgrass shot, which I never

had a good impression of. Surprisingly, the shot tasted better than expected – I suspected that she added something else into the otherwise ungodly and unsightly shot.

Breakfast came and went, I gave myself a mental pat on not gorging out like I usually do. I made my way to the Wellness Centre, a vast space especially since its guests came from all over the world to partake in its treatments and programs. Before the consultation with the naturopath, I was taken into a room for a Body Bioimpedance Analysis (BIA) – a series of tests that measured my body composition electronically. Through this, I learnt quite a bit about my organs' and cells' functions, as well as some health concerns that I might be facing. Soon after, I met my naturopath, Emma and I quickly brought her up to speed on my current health situation while she explained in further detail my BIA results.

After assessing my situation, we then discussed the wellness programs that would best fit me. We both agreed that the Asian Bliss would be ideal for my five-day stay as well as provide me with insight into the holistic healing traditions of Asia while

promoting bliss. As she'd explained, this program combined Ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine and traditional Thai therapies with exercises and practices from diverse Asian traditions. Emma also mentioned that she'd schedule in a few other signature Kamalaya treatments that she'd thought I'd enjoy. Schedule decided, I was shown the Kamalaya menus that are based on a fusion of Eastern and Western healthy, inspired cuisine. Menus include vegetarian, fish and meat dishes as well as detox and customised meals. I was also informed that there were placecards next to every dish offered on the breakfast buffet so that guests were able to distinguish what they could eat according to their programs. 'D' for Detox and I for 'Ideal Weight', which cleared up all the questions I had from my earlier observations over breakfast. As for the wheatgrass shot I had, Emma confirmed my suspicions that some juices have been added into the concoction. More mental pats on the back.

My first treatment session wasn't until the afternoon so I spent the rest of the morning familiarising myself with Kamalaya's grounds and the many activities available. A few hours

were wiled on the private beach reading and planning my schedule for the next four days. As I'd cleverly forgotten to pack my sports shoes, the fitness activities were off my agenda. However, it was pretty clear I'd be waking up everyday at the crack of dawn as I was keen on partaking in their daily yoga sessions. From Yin Yoga to Tai Chi sessions, I was eager to get back into my yoga routines.

Lunch was at Amrita Café. Kamalaya's second restaurant located by the swimming pools at the edge of flowering lotus ponds and overlooking the sea. Lunch was also another heavenly experience where I helped myself to their local specialties with a Western twist. Stomach fulfilled, I then visited the Alchemy Tea Lounge that offered breathtaking views of the entire resort, a place for enjoying light snacks and all sorts of workshops from Stress Management talks to Fruit & Vegetable Carving classes.

By 3pm, I was back at the Wellness Centre to start my first Asian Bliss treatment – Indian Head Massage. For the next hour, I was given a back, shoulders and head massage with a

warm coconut oil. All the tension I held in my upper body was released straight after and my therapist also advised me to make a trip down to their Steam Cavern to further enhance the benefits of the massage I just had. Unlike the usual steam rooms we experience in spas, Kamalaya's Steam Cavern was structured like a cave with a hot waterfall to ease aching muscles. After 10 minutes, I emerged the cave and went straight under the Ice Shower. Again, this practice is to complete the hot steam process and helps to thoroughly release body toxins.

An early dinner was on the cards so I headed back to Soma after I was done at the Wellness Centre, and taking Emma's advice to get more protein into my diet, chose a cod for my main and a sinful dessert of chocolate mousse – which I overheard from a fellow guest was too good to not indulge in. While many guests travelling alone dined at a communal table to befriend fellow guests, I dined alone with the determination to have this holiday be about myself and my newfound independence.

As it was a Friday night, Kamalaya hosted

a special activity by their private beach where guests had the opportunity to take part in a Thai tradition – floating lanterns. We were all provided with cards during dinner to write wishes on to be tied onto the lanterns. It was a beautiful ceremony as guests gathered around a bonfire and set off their own lanterns which dotted the night sky like stars.

It was an eventful day and the moment I returned to my villa, I was out cold.

DAY 2 Healing Powers

Another peaceful night's rest without the aid of night lights. First activity on my cards was Pilates held at the Yoga Pavilion, followed by a quick breakfast and my second Asian Bliss treatment – a 60-minute Reiki session. Reiki is a spiritual Japanese practice for stress reduction and the promotion of healing, it works by the transferring of life force energy through touch



and meditation. Initially, it took awhile to get used to the atmosphere but soon I was lulled into a slight trance as the therapist laid calming touches on the body's different chakra points. Personally, I find Reiki a rather intense practice but would recommend it to those who are in need of emotional healing.

Reiki was followed by Kamalaya's signature Vital Essence Oil Massage, a full-body massage using uniquely blended aromatherapy oils. There were five different oils to choose from, each representing the five different elements – earth, wind, fire, wood and water. After taking a whiff of each, I picked Fire for its earthy scent that instantly filled my tummy with a warm sensation. The massage was out of this world as the therapist worked deeply on my tired muscles and sore spots. It was 90 minutes of full bliss, which I spent most of in deep slumber.

Out of pure vanity, I also scheduled myself manicure and pedicure sessions. I was badly in need of one and besides, I had time to kill. Another 90 minutes passed while I was being pampered and primped to perfection. My last treatment for the day was the traditional Thai massage with hot compress application. This massage took place in a tree-top open-air hut and while I was getting kneaded, I also got to enjoy a beautiful sunset. The hot compress was new to me, which were heated stones applied to the entire body to soothe tired muscles.

By the end of my day at the Wellness Centre, I was in a state of constant bliss and happily chowed down another scrumptious dinner before watching a scheduled documentary film with other guests at the 24-hour library. I might have forgotten to add that there's no television in any of the rooms, but DVD players are available on special requests to be set up in your room. The lack of a television was a horrifying revelation before I came to Kamalaya, yet two days into my stay here and the television was a long-forgotten nuisance.



DAY 3 Lazy Sunday

Falling asleep with ease is now my forte and waking up all chirpy was a complete opposite of my former self. I kicked off the day with Tai Chi, an activity which I used to enjoy with my grandmother at the local community centre back in the day. Today's experience was delightful and I learned a great way to gently prepare the body for the day ahead.

I was glad to have the first half of Sunday to myself as I was eager to get a tan by the pool and finish the book I brought along with me. It was truly a lazy Sunday spent doing absolutely

nothing substantial before my foot massage session. If anything, everyone knows I'm addicted to foot reflexology and can be a tough critic, so I was pretty impressed by my therapist. I first received a warm herbal foot bath using mostly ginger and lemongrass, then the therapist went on to work her magic on my feet. By the end of the session, I literally had happy feet – light-footed and there was a spring in my step.

A traditional Asian hand massage followed soon after which was a new experience for me, since I've never had someone dedicate all of 45 minutes to massaging my hands. It turned out to be a truly satisfying experience, especially when I felt my knuckles cracking with every pull. Soon after, a heavy downpour started and

I quickly escaped back to my villa with every intention to order room service for dinner. Before that, I had a shower under the rain, which I have to say was the most liberating experience ever, having hot and cold water rain down on you at the same time.

To waste away the time as it continued to pour through the night, I decided to indulge my artistic instincts and asked for an easel, canvas and paint to be brought to my villa – and in-room activity that was highly recommended by the other guests. The rest of the night went by quickly and soon enough it was the end of another amazing day.

DAY 4 Solitary Celebration

This is the day I was dreading. I officially turned 29 and was all alone. I had a bit of a sleep in and woke up feeling anything but my age. Since my first treatment of the day was Chi Nei Tsang (a Chinese abdominal massage), I couldn't have any food or drinks intake before so I skipped breakfast. Back at the Wellness Centre again, the staff greeted me with bright and cheerful smiles and even came up to me personally one by one to wish me a happy birthday. I was touched by their gesture to make me feel at home and like I wasn't all alone.

The abdominal massage was just what I needed. Just by pressing on strategic points, the therapist was able to tell how my major organs were functioning and what I should work on to ensure I don't develop any serious health concerns in the future. It was uncomfortable and hurt when she pressed down on certain parts, but that was only because I had loads of bad eating habits which would continue to do my body more damage if I continued down that road. This was followed by a massage using warm oil to strengthen and repair the internal organs. It's a Chinese belief that the gut acts like a second brain, which explains why people commonly suffer from stomach aches when stressed or coming down with an illness.

Chi Nei Tsang was acceded by a 60-minute Kati Vasti treatment, an Ayurvedic procedure of pouring warm medicated oil over the lower back bordered with a herbal paste. The therapist told me that this is used commonly to cure spinal problems and back pains. I felt a tingling sensation on my spine while the oil was poured on, but it did wonders at releasing this nagging backache that I pretty much accepted as part and parcel of getting older. Imagine the welcome relief when the treatment significantly reduced the pressure that I'd helplessly gotten used to.

My birthday afternoon was spent in the library scouring over the variety of books that came in numerous languages then a stroll around the resort to explore its vast expanse lush greenery – Mother Nature itself is a healing agent. As part of my Asian Bliss program, I also had a one-on-one Pranayama session with a personal instructor. Pranayama is the 'Science of Breath', where one learns the control of the vital force in the air we breathe. This exercise

when practiced on a regular basis is known to calm the mind, balance the emotions and reduce stress and anxiety. The instructor took me through basic breathing exercises, as well as a stress releasing exercise. My take home from this session was to practice them daily, morning and night to help alleviate sleep deprivation as well as start the day on a positive note.

Tonight, it rained again which I have come to appreciate as part of living and breathing nature. I also had a birthday cake specially made for me by the kitchen staff, which I have no qualms on stuffing my face with – it was too delicious to say no to. Well, it's definitely another first for me – a first birthday since I turned 18 that I've celebrated without a drop of alcohol and I felt mighty good about myself. This is a personal milestone and guaranteed another night of blissful sleep.


DAY 5 A Fond Farewell

I can't believe that my stay at Kamalaya has come to an end. Not only has the staff and other guests been extremely hospitable and friendly, but I've come to learn many things about myself. I was pretty sad to have to return to reality, but I knew I was heading back to Singapore with a positive takeaway and new lease on life.

Before I packed up and bade farewell to my home for the past five days, my last treatment was the Royal Ayurvedic massage. This is one of the most traditional Ayurvedic treatments and is essentially a full-body oil massage. This massage involves nudity and the massaging of the chest area, so there will be an initial discomfort for women, but I soon got over mine with the knowledge that it was good for me – and we're all women after all. Using warm medicated oil the therapist massages the nerve points with brisk circular rubs while helping to strengthen connective tissues.

After this treatment, I squeezed in a quick few minutes in the steam cavern before I had a warm shower to wash off the residue oil from the massage. Before long, I was all packed and after saying my goodbyes (with promises to return soon) to the Kamalaya staff, I was on my way to Koh Samui Airport to come home.

NEVER SAY NEVER

If you thought you're the sort who could never go on a holiday alone, think again. Sometime it's the solidarity that will set us free and you'll be surprised by the things you learn about yourself. Having gone to Kamalaya without a clue and feet dragging, I can testify to the resort's philosophy to 'feel life's potential'. Whether you're looking to adopt a healthy new lifestyle or simply need break away from reality to rejuvenate, Kamalaya is certainly the place to be. Mind, body and soul – it's a perfect formula that works like chicke soup for any soul. 

To find out more about Kamalaya Wellness Sanctuary and Holistic Spa Resort and the wellness programs, please visit www.kamalaya.com

PRANAYAMA IS THE 'SCIENCE OF BREATH', WHERE ONE LEARNS THE CONTROL OF THE VITAL FORCE IN THE AIR WE BREATHE.