

island escape

# Retreat Treat

Manning Up At The Spa

Spiritual sceptic and detox doubter Craig Osment reluctantly moves into the Zen zone with surprising results. Rejuvenation, relaxation and chakra realignment don't have to be a steep learning curve.



Being an unreconstructed sybarite who believes holidays are for indulgence rather than denial, I anticipated a week's confinement at a 'wellness' centre with a certain amount of scepticism. Not that I'm sceptical about holistic health, naturopathy or alternative medicine, it's more a suspicion that there might be a little too much quasi religious fervour attached to the wellness industry for my taste.

As it turns out, I was both right and wrong in my expectations. These places do have an insidious way of getting under your skin in both the subcutaneous and metaphorical sense, but it was an entirely welcome intrusion as it transpired. I found myself hooked from almost the first moment I drove in past the two gilt elephants either side of the impressive entry and stepped into the lobby of the magnificent Kamalaya (lotus realm) Koh Samui spa resort. An all-enveloping peace exudes from this place which I found myself embracing with enthusiasm.

Sure, there are little shrines all over the place, Buddhas in the foyer (I love a bit of Buddha), an ancient monks' cave that's like a subterranean temple with incense and statuary under a giant granite boulder, mini temples dotted about the grounds and a pervading sense of spiritual calm, which the Thai staff seem to radiate as part of their DNA. The traditional greeting at first seems like I've been mistaken for some sort of visiting Caucasian deity but the bow with the hands clasped in the prayer position is turned on for all comers, but even after being disabused of my godly status I found this reverential courtesy something I was adopting myself, although it's awkward when your hands are full to adopt the full pose.

## It's A Woman's World

The second impression was that of the place being a world of women, my rough count over the first couple of days was a ratio of eight to one in favour of females (the actual statistics suggest 35% male, 65% female).

Indeed playing guess-the-guest proved a bit more difficult than usual. The paradox of this place is that it is at once an upmarket resort but primarily a sanctuary and retreat for those seekers of not only wellness but possibly spiritual enlightenment or at least an insight into 'lifestyle choices'. So it attracts an amazingly eclectic and cosmopolitan mix of people who not only have taken the journey but are still on it.

So it was boho to CEO, Marley to Mahler, tats to J P Tod's and ethnically just as diverse; Germans, Dutch, English, Israeli, Thai, Australian, American, Japanese and a few expats from nearby Asian cities. Not your usual suspects at all.

It's also the perfect holiday destination for a woman flying solo as interaction between guests is encouraged and the communal dining table (optional) in the magnificent open air Soma restaurant is a great way to get to know your fellow acolytes and is also a meeting place for the various visiting practitioners. So you can catch up on your Visual Coding Displacement Therapy with Angela Cummins or Chakra

**Opposite page, top:** A two bedroom beachfront villa with private pool. **Below:** the spectacular lap pool adjacent to Amrita Cafe where lunch is served daily in individual farés or in dining rooms with views over the beach.

PICTURES: Craig Osment and Kamalaya Koh Samui





Clearing with Shu Bretag or perhaps a bit of Hypnotherapy (one of my favourites), Neuro-Linguistic Programming and Theta Healing with Anthony while you eat.

### It's A Wrap!

Having arrived at night and delivered directly to the resort which is about 23kms from Samui Airport, there was a Truman Show-like sense of disconnection from the real world. My concerns about being institutionalised were partly well founded but not for the reasons I suspected. I found myself a willing inmate and immediately addicted to my daily regimen of massage, sauna and all sorts of pampering at the hands of a group of fabulously efficient, gentle and experienced therapists who go about their ministrations with calm efficiency and solicitous attention. I felt absolutely no need to see any more of the outside world until encouraged to venture out to the Fisherman's Village night market on my last night. This was colourful and lively and filled with a typical Asian buzz but in my slightly dissociated state, I was happily ready to get back to the serenity of Kamalaya for my final meal rather than indulge in the street food and the noisy festivities of the market.

Depending on the program chosen you may find yourself in an infrared sauna, face down on a massage table (my preferred position), subjected to acupuncture, detoxing in a full body wrap (mine was the clay and lotus wrap), participating in a spot of lymphatic drainage or perhaps Moxabustion (this involves the burning of something called Mugwort with heat applied to specific areas of the body to invigorate circulation). There's also cupping, an ancient technique where bamboo or glass cups are used to release blockages and improve circulation, or Tui Na, a Chinese therapeutic massage which 'kneads toxic residues loose from tissues and into the lymphatic system for disposal'. (See box for more details on some of the 70 treatments available.)

All these treatments take place in one of the many rooms attached to the Wellness Sanctuary which is the centrepiece of the entire property with many of its beautiful hillside spaces opening directly to the breeze and expansive views over the bay and nearby islands. It's up here that you'll find the steam cavern, the infrared sauna, the Shakti fitness centre, the yoga pavilion and the massage sala, along with plunge pools and a pavilion for sitting in silence with a cup of herb tea or a book and contemplating the stunning scenery.

### Step Therapy

Which brings me to resort itself; designed by Australian-born architect and artist, Robert Powell it's built in 'tropical modern' style. Its numerous spacious villas or bungalows (all with huge decks, fans and air con and gorgeous semi open bathrooms) are discreetly hidden among the greenery within a steep valley which flows to a private beach below. When I say steep, I mean intimidatiously too steep for me at first glance. So in spite of having chosen the least aerobically challenging program (stress management, relaxation and sleep therapy which involved a lot of massage) I found myself panting and breathless by the time I got to my treatment room after negotiating 216 steps from my villa, and it was located at the



Above: The view up the valley from the water. Below: The temple

meme is apparent throughout the property while shrines and eastern dieties are scattered about the grounds; and the foyer gong.





pummel using her entire body as a fulcrum, a weight and an instrument of torture but it was blissful suffering. Stretching every sinew and tendon, elongating every muscle and limb. This was a 'dry' massage, in that it was not oleaginous at all and no oil wells were harmed in the making of the moves.

Given that Thai women are mostly slight and small, it's extraordinary that they are such firm masseuses, they have palms of silk and thumbs of steel which unerringly seek out every knot and nook that might be suffering a 'blockage' or toxic obstruction which they eliminate with 'extreme prejudice' as they say in the military – toxins are the enemy here and are shot on sight.

### Toxic Termination

Indeed the restaurant menus are designed for just this purpose but the food is fabulous and full of flavour, and for me they managed a minor miracle by making vegetables taste like more than water and fibre. For carnivores (those not on detox or healthy weight-loss diets) there's plenty of choice from lamb shank Massaman curry, to ostrich loin (exotic!), duck and chicken as well as plenty of seafood both local and imported all enhanced by Thai herbs and spices and absolutely delicious.

The breakfast buffet is a visual as well as culinary treat, tables laden with fresh fruit and crudites, endless jars of nuts,

Right: One of a pair gilt pachyderms that form a welcoming committee at the entrance. Far right: The gorgeous secluded bay and beach with its distinctive granite boulders lining the shoreline. Below: Tea master San Bao conducts his tea ceremonies several days a week at the tea bar in the Alchemy lounge; food and more food: The breakfast buffet is littered with fresh fruit, nuts and breads as well as invigorating wheatgrass shots and fresh juices; cooking classes are conducted in Soma, the main dining room; a welcome food parcel is found in your room on arrival; traditional Thai dish mieng kham is great to share.



### The Founders

Karina Stewart, Doctor of Chinese Medicine and graduate in cultural anthropology and Asian religions with husband John, spiritual seeker and ashram disciple.

### The Programs

**Detox and Rejuvenation** designed to enhance the body's ability to eliminate toxins and accumulated waste and achieve ideal balance through ideal nutrition and healthy cuisine.

**Ideal Weight** Created to identify areas of physical imbalance and achieve optimal weight with dietary recommendations and guidance from holistic practitioners.

**Optimal Fitness** A personalised approach to help achieve fitness goals from cardiovascular to increasing upper body strength and toning body shape through regular fitness habits.

**Sleep Enhancement** A therapeutic program designed to combat sleep deprivation and re-establish healthy restful sleep through the use of Chinese medicine and massage therapy.

**Asian Bliss** An immersion into holistic healing combining Ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine and traditional Thai therapies to help promote bliss, renewal and joy.

**Balance and Revitalisation** Designed to counteract the stresses of contemporary life through a variety of revitalising activities from a mind, body spirit perspective.

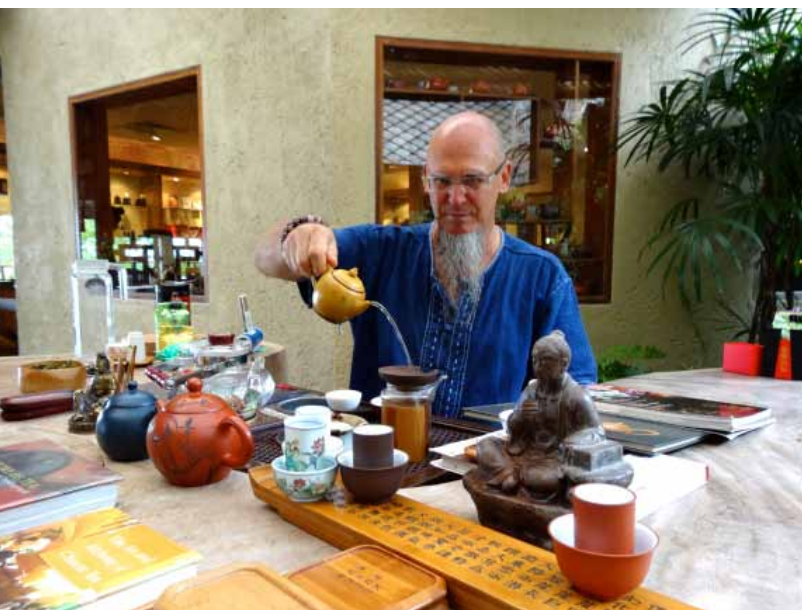
**Relax and Renew** This is for those seeking time and place to step back from their lives and recover balance, relax and renew so you can face the future with new passion and energy.

The paid structured programs are supplemented by a large daily selection of other activities such as yoga, aquarobics and tai chi.

**For detailed information on programs see W:** [kamalaya.com](http://kamalaya.com)  
**Getting There**  
**Thai Airways** to Bangkok with a **Bangkok Airways** connection to Koh Samui. **W:** [thaiairways.com](http://thaiairways.com) **W:** [bangkokair.com](http://bangkokair.com)

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spa resort. An all-enveloping peace exudes from this place which I found myself embracing with enthusiasm."







Above: The Alchemy Lounge is perfect for afternoon tea or pre-dinner drinks with sweeping views over the bay and nearby islands. Below: The lower plunge pool with its impressive entrance is set directly behind the beach and ideal for an after-lunch dip. Bottom: One of the huge semi outdoor bathrooms with its clay brick walls and temple cutouts adds a luxurious touch.



organic jams, soups, breads and a selection of eggs any way you choose. Then there's the juice selection; all mixed with same care a cocktail waiter might lavish on a complex creation but all designed to do you good. Mostly they taste wonderful with the possible exception of my daily shot of gotu kola juice which I was assured was essential 'brain food', the flavour of this concoction is vaguely reminiscent of kava but when followed by a wheatgrass shot and a Kamalaya Detox Juice I was looking for more steps to climb. Another of my misconceptions destroyed, you can eat healthy food and enjoy it at the same time, and I took a cooking course so that I can detox in the privacy of my own home, and I have a certificate (and apron) to prove it; one of only two tertiary qualifications to my name!

This holistic approach to health is central to the entire experience at Kamalaya, these days when every resort claims to be a spa, Kamalaya is a spa which is also a five-star resort with all the expected trappings – impeccable service, wonderful, surgically hygienic facilities, great restaurants, and there's even a 'pillow menu' and mattress topper service to ensure your sleep is undisturbed. And, to further enhance your peace and quiet (the soundtrack is silence and shakuhachi) the waterfall at the top of the valley is obligingly turned off at night and restarted at 7am each day, they think of everything!

### No Money Needed

Most guests choose an all inclusive package whereby they nominate and pay for a program and after that no money changes hands, everything is included except alcoholic drinks which are cheap at around nine dollars a glass. Not that you see too many glasses, I think I was the only person drinking wine and with a beverage list stretching to 45 different drinks only four were beer or wine, so there's a subtle suggestion that wine intake be limited, which in my case, surprisingly it was. Another tick for painless denial.

While there are any number of all-inclusive programs designed for your specific needs, you can opt for your wellness to be served à la carte if you prefer. This enables you to choose and pay as you go (same with meals in this case) from a wide range of treatments from Ayurveda therapies, Traditional Chinese Medicine and diagnostic procedures as well as avail yourself of the visiting practitioners special presentations and treatments.

My seven-day Relax and Renew program started at around AU\$3000 for accommodation, food and about 11 hours of treatments plus assessment consultations. There are three- and five-day options which start from as little as AU\$1660 which is good value when you consider that unless you decide to take the occasional glass of wine there's nothing more to pay.

At end of the week I was subjected to another wellness consultation where I found that my weight was still 64.3kg (after three large meals each day) and my height, remarkably remained at 177cms in spite of all that pulling and stretching. But I had emerged fitter, refreshed, rejuvenated, relaxed and with all chakras in alignment.

Having arrived a sceptic I departed a convert but I suspect a bit of recidivism on the drinking front is to come. All in all an experience to be recommended, even for a pretend passive resister. 🍷