



A CHANGE OF MIND

With six nights blocked out in her diary and a lot of unwinding to do, **Di Webster** heads to one of Asia's most coveted health spas.

I WAS sitting at my desk a few years ago when the notoriously driven editor of the magazine I then worked for sashayed through the office in a pastel caftan, her long hair wild and untamed and her face as shiny as a freshly minted coin.

"I've been to Kamalaya," she declared, without explaining if that was a place or a state of mind. A small crowd gathered. "This is the new me," she continued. "From now on, it's all about work/life balance." Someone spluttered. Then, with the air of a Zen master, the world's most unlikely hippie floated away to her corner office – and betting opened on how long the transformation would last.

Kamalaya, as it turns out, is a wellness retreat on the southern tip of Koh Samui,



(Clockwise from left) Kamalaya's Alchemy Tea Lounge; the Buddhist Monks' Cave; villas hidden amid the trees, just moments from the beach; salmon steak on the resort's menu

history, therapists in cheery yellow martial arts-style outfits line a bench at reception, waiting for guests who, if my own experience isn't unique, are currently in the changing room in a tangle of tablecloth-sized sarongs and disposable knickers.

Later, naturopath Lauren Scinetti draws two basic circles on my BIA report to demonstrate cell structure: the first one is plump and smooth; the second, depleted and jagged like a dropped dollop of scrambled eggs. Smooth is good, jagged not so much.

This consultation is where your goals for the stay – weight loss, detoxification – are set and your treatment schedule determined (but there are no firm rules; “Our guests are grown-ups,” says Lauren). My regular diet – Paleo-ish, with French fries and wine – has delivered me some pretty smooth cells, apparently. Though Lauren says I can have what I want from the vast Kamalaya menu – and beer and wine is available – I decide to give alcohol a miss for a week. How hard can that be in the steamy tropics when the sky streaks pink and orange at the end of the day and sun lounges line the pool near my suite? Who'd want a cocktail?

Opened in 2005, Kamalaya is the brainchild of John Stewart, who trained as a yogi in the Himalayas, and his wife, Karina, a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine. The choice of site – a dramatic landscape of tropical jungle and ancient granite boulders – was sealed when John came across a cave where, for centuries, Buddhist monks meditated. But having a vision was one thing; running a 75-suite retreat was another. So in 2003, the couple brought in Swiss hotelier Marc-Antoine Cornaz as a partner. Despite his background, you won't find a TV in your room, a morning newspaper at the door or

alcohol in the minibar. Food, it seems, is just one element of the detoxing process. (Escaping may be another: this is where Fergie retreated to when her invitation to William and Kate's wedding didn't turn up.)

Outside the set programs – which cover everything from adrenal burnout to intensive yoga and include sleep enhancement, fitness and support with life changes – there are additional daily activities. In six days I have six massages (two oil, one Thai, one head, one hands and one abdominal), one Reiki treatment, a mentoring session, two visits to the naturopath, one Pilates class, a pranayama (breath control) lesson, one aquarobics workout, one snorkelling trip, a cooking class and a mindfulness seminar. I have more places to be than Hillary Clinton. But this is no boot camp.

“There is absolutely no pressure on you to attend anything,” notes Shiree Kay, a real estate agent from Victoria's Dandenong Ranges who's on her fourth visit in three years.

in Thailand. I know this because I'm sipping ginger tea in the retreat's breezy wellness centre, the anchor point of a sprawling collection of treatment rooms where, over the next six days, I will not only meditate but also be massaged, motivated and mentored. Yes, curiosity finally kicked my cynicism to the kerb. After a busy year, I wanted whatever it was that she was having.

To start that process, I'm about to undergo bio-impedance analysis (BIA), which sounds like the work of an evil Bond villain but in fact measures the ratio of your body fat to lean muscle mass and determines the health of your cells, the state of your metabolism and what, if any, toxins are kicking around in your system. As I tick boxes on my medical



For our round-up of 10 luxe wellness retreats in Australia, visit travelinsider.qantas.com.au.



Kamalaya's lap pool (left); the red rocks of Boynton Canyon loom over Mii Amo, Arizona

Admittedly I'm not on the weight-loss or detox program but when the time comes to leave I'm heavier than when I checked in. With three meals a day included, there's a tendency to indulge (who knew roast ostrich loin was a thing?). The most popular detox offering? Mung bean risotto. No kidding – it's delicious. As Shiree observes of the detox menu, "It's not rabbit food."

Now, in the interests of self-improvement, I have a confession. At the end of day one,



Flight path

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Qantas flies to Bangkok from Sydney, with connections to Koh Samui via partner airlines. qantas.com

I may have sent an email to a colleague speculating that six nights at Kamalaya was going to be too long; I am, I may have pointed out, a very busy woman.

Then, not long after dawn on the last day, with my forearms resting on the edge of the lap pool and the Gulf of Thailand glistening in the rising sun, I watch transfixed as tiny bees buzz around a bougainvillea, darting from one lipstick-pink blossom to another and another and another. There's nothing on my mind but sheer wonder at the miracle of nature.

When I return to the office, someone says I look well. "Thanks. I've been to Kamalaya." ●

Kamalaya recently launched group retreats. For details, visit kamalaya.com.

Health generators Alex Greig discovers four spas around the globe with a focus on staying well.



Mii Amo, Arizona, United States

Hugged by – and blending into – the awe-inspiring red rocks of Boynton Canyon, Mii Amo (miiamo.com) is a low-slung 16-room spa located within Enchantment, a 28-hectare resort 14 kilometres north-west of Sedona, Arizona. Packages offer three meals and two spa treatments a day, fitness classes, wellness lectures, mountain

biking and hiking; facilities include swimming pools, tennis, a steam room and sauna. Though Mii Amo describes its culinary offerings as akin to "haute cuisine, minus the guilt", each menu item comes with a calorie count and fat, carb and protein content. Gulp. Alcohol is available.

Lefay Resort & Spa, Lago di Garda, Italy

A spa resort with fine wine, cocktails

and a cigar bar? We must be in Italy. North-west of Verona, on the shores of Lake Garda, Lefay Resort & Spa (lefoyresorts.com) ticks so many boxes it's hard to think of a reason not to go. Treatments combine traditional Chinese medicine and Western science; there's even a wellness program for children over four. For an extra €50 (about \$75) a day, guests can take their fur babies, too.

Mukul Resort, Golf & Spa, Guacalito de la Isla, Nicaragua

Mukul Resort, Golf & Spa (mukulresort.com) is set between a lush tangle of primeval forest and the pearly sands of the Emerald Coast. Its 37 guest suites comprise beach villas, bohios (thatched cottages) and two private compounds. Spa treatments are

drawn from diverse traditions, including Turkish hammams and ancient Mesoamerican practices. In-house instructors teach yoga, while resident shaman Yamuna works on the intangible side of things. The David McLay Kidd golf course gives the resort a country-club feel but the Flor de Caña tasting room is pure Nicaragua – the high-end rum has been in owner Carlos Pellas's family for five generations.

Fregate Island Private, Seychelles

You won't find buried treasure on Fregate Island (fregate.com); its riches are all out in the open. Rare wildlife, including 2200 Aldabra giant tortoises, sea turtles and more than 100 species of tropical birds, call the island home. The Rock Spa offers treatments using products made with ingredients grown on the island. Collect native fruits and herbs from the garden and the therapists will help you transform them into face masks, hair treatments and body wraps. Staying in one of the resort's 16 residences, each with a private infinity pool, spa and day bed, gives you free access to the island's walking trails, beaches and inland harbour.

Lorna Tucker