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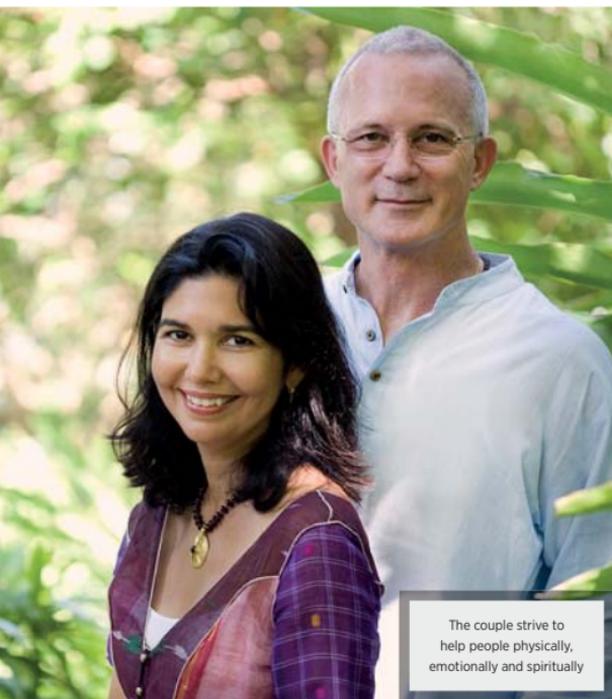
John & Karina Stewart

How the inspirational couple
are evolving Kamalaya

FAMILY MATTERS

John & Karina Stewart

Guests routinely speak of transformation following their Kamalaya experience. Neena Dhillon asks the inspirational couple behind the wellness concept just how they do it and how they're evolving it



Embarking on its 14th year of operations, Kamalaya has just added two more spa accolades to its clutch of 40 industry and consumer awards, an achievement that founders John and Karina Stewart put down to the vision, love and commitment of their team. And what a team it is. There are 350 staff serving guests of the 76-key holistic wellness sanctuary, which cascades down a hillside to a secluded bay in Koh Samui, Thailand. Average year-round occupancy stands at 70 per cent, and 50 per cent of guests travel solo. They come in big numbers from the UK and Europe, while visitors from Australia and New Zealand have increased by 20 per cent since 2015.

A number of guests are stressed out, depleted in terms of energy, others are seeking to change things, break bad habits, or simply reset lifestyles. And that's why they choose Kamalaya. Because its synergistic approach to wellness aims to make a real difference to people's lives by reconnecting them with their own potential. "Today, many of our guests express a life-changing experience," confirms John. "Our comment cards show consistent rating levels of above 90 per cent in terms of service. We have a 40 per cent repeat visitor rate and over 20 per cent have visited more than four times, often returning with family and friends." ▶



Forty per cent of guests revisit Kamalaya, a retreat which aims to make a real difference by reconnecting people with their own potential



► **Addressing stress**

At the crux of the concept is the intertwining of the couple's knowledge of ancient wisdoms, expressed in a contemporary form. For Mexico-born Karina, this is a 37-year specialism in Asian healing traditions, including a masters degree in Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) gained from Yo San University in California. John in turn - who left his native Vancouver aged 16 because of his interest in Asian philosophy - has 25 years' experience of serving communities in the Himalayas, 16 of these under the tutelage of a yogi master.

The couple have a shared dream to help people through physical, emotional, mental, psychological and spiritual wellbeing. And it was during his own recovery from a life-threatening illness that John chanced upon the land on which the Thai sanctuary thrives today, finding himself drawn to the site because there's a cave at its heart, used by Buddhist monks for meditation and retreat for over 300 years.

Kamalaya took four years from its launch in 2005 (see SB06/3 p82) to break even. Since those early years, the



Women's health, fertility and elderly clients are all new entities which interest Karina

number of wellness programmes has increased from four to 14, with length of stay from a minimum three nights to two weeks. The start price for a three-night programme is just under THB60,000 (US\$1,879, €1,676, £1,445). Detox remains popular because Kamalaya is well versed in supporting people through the process, drawing on its pool of TCM and naturopathic expertise. But it's been superseded by programmes addressing stress and burnout.

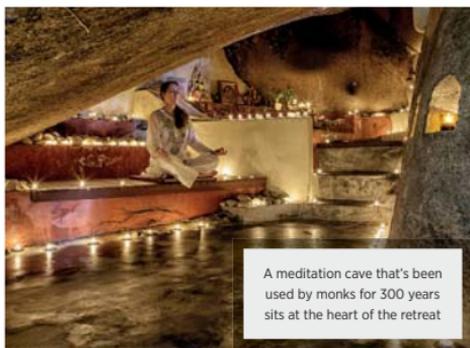
"Whether it's executives, creative professionals with no life-work boundaries, or mothers juggling children and career, we're finding so many people are struggling with the 24-hour plugged-in lifestyle," notes Karina. "Most people are already engaged in a search for wellness when they arrive but we find they're coming at a younger age compared to when we first opened, on average about five years, today in their early 40s." ►



It's evident that guests are now coming at a younger age, in their early 40s



There are 350 staff (below) who play a crucial role in helping guests feel 'safe' in their transformational journey



A meditation cave that's been used by monks for 300 years sits at the heart of the retreat

FIRST-PERSON EXPERIENCE

Kamalaya's Embracing Change programme Neena Dhillon

Having recently gone through an emotionally turbulent period in my life, I was intrigued by Kamalaya's Embracing Change programme.

Since it is designed as a minimum five-night programme, it's worth noting I gained only a brief insight over a long weekend.

Any stay begins with bioimpedance analysis and a wellness consultation with a naturopath. Sitting with Leila for 45 minutes, I'm struck by how she's balancing my reasons for visiting – yes, as a journalist, but also as a person with a lung condition and life changes to grapple with – into the way I spend my time.

Warm and reassuring, she suggests two treatments to complement my 90-minute personal mentoring session. Within an hour, I'm having an abdominal chi nei tsang massage, one of the several treatments included in the five-night package, during which the therapist works on my stomach to balance the nervous system and release emotional tension. It's an effective 60 minutes – in Taoist thinking, as with other ancient healing modalities, the gut is considered the second brain. After a satisfying dinner, selected from the detox menu, I'm whacked and sleep early.

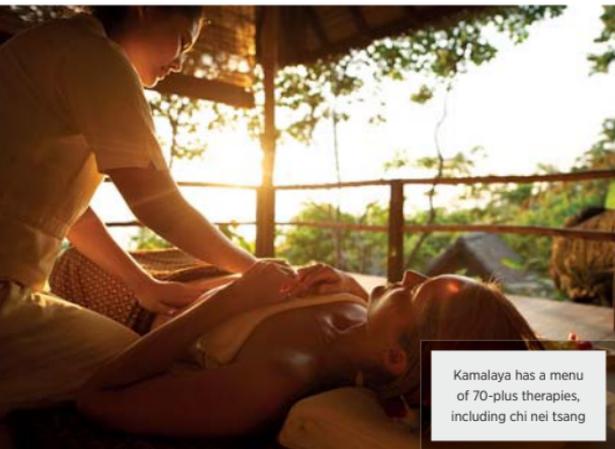
Next morning I'm up with the birds to drop into one of the day's six free holistic activities. Pranayama gives an introduction into how we can harness our breath as a grounding tool and we're shown how to work the practice into our daily routines. Then I'm off to my mentoring session with Sujay Seshadri, a life skills trainer and monastic lifestyle devotee. I'm soon comfortable enough to talk about two personal upheavals that have thrown me a curve ball and,



I feel fearful of letting go at one point but Sujay is beside me with kind words of encouragement

in return. Sujay shares key moments from his formative years when turned unpleasant emotions into a positive. During our 90 minutes, I can see Sujay is laying the groundwork for a visualisation in which he asks me to picture certain encounters, aided by meditative breathing, and vent pent-up emotions I've been needing to release. I cry hot, angry tears, but I'm not embarrassed. I feel fearful of letting go at one point but Sujay is beside me with kind words of encouragement. He seems to instinctively understand my feelings, while making a connection between my tendency to suppress how I feel and my physical condition. During the visualisation, my breathing becomes momentarily clogged, making the link all the more clearer in my mind. After a heartfelt hug, I leave feeling a bit wobbly, reflective and resolved to break some of my coping habits.

Truth be told, I feel introspective for the rest of my stay but the mix of the environment and care of the hosts helps me to process what I've learnt. Sujay explains that clients can spend the first session simply crying because they finally feel safe enough to do so. This seems unique to Kamalaya; the trust I am able to build almost immediately with my mentors. I can see why, over a longer period, another two sessions would lead to deep transformation. Still, Leila's instinct that I end my stay with an ayurvedic kati vasti oil-based massage on the lower back feels right, and I'm not surprised to learn that, in TCM, this area of the body relates to imbalances caused by not feeling supported in life. It is another insightful step in my Kamalaya journey.



Kamalaya has a menu of 70-plus therapies, including chi nei tsang

► **A focus on inner lives**

Always ahead of the curve, Kamalaya introduced the first of its programmes catering to emotional disposition and balance five years ago. The five-night tailored retreat includes bioimpedance analysis, wellness consultation, personal mentoring and five additional treatments from Kamalaya's menu of 70-plus therapies (see above). "Life is a series of changes, be that a move, relationship break-up, loss or unknown we're facing," Karina says. "We realised we could inspire and motivate people through these changes, disrupting negative psychological patterns and habitual responses to challenging situations. Kamalaya is a safe environment with the practitioners in place to deliver this programme. Of course, you have to ensure your team has the depth of training to do this mentoring work – I've recently interviewed a team



Embedded in nature and infused with genuine, caring staff, Kamalaya has all the attributes to alleviate other causes of mental stress such as loneliness



member with doctoral specialism in CBT and psychology, for instance."

As a destination embedded in nature, with a village atmosphere, and infused with a genuine, caring, non-scripted service philosophy, Kamalaya has the attributes to help people alleviate other causes of mental distress such as loneliness. On one level, the community table at dinnertime has proved a hit among guests seeking company over a meal to share encounters of the day and insights into what they're going through. It is the noisiest part of the restaurant – and lasting friendships have been formed at Kamalaya. On another level, the profound meditative practices that can be learnt here as well as the holistic scope of programmes means that guests leave feeling more fulfilled, often by resetting the relationship with themselves. Karina observes: "When you feel content and gratified, there's no

space left for loneliness." John picks up: "The act of pausing and disconnecting, coupled with an intention to harness our own emotional intelligence and resilience, leads naturally to greater mental stability."

Beyond Koh Samui

While there are no plans to launch new programmes at present, Karina is interested in how Kamalaya could support lifestyles that advance healthy ageing. She's aware of how stress can age us prematurely on a biological level, having experienced this in her late 40s. "I took medical tests during this period and was devastated by what stress had done to my body," she reveals.

Another idea she's exploring is whether the health benefits of fitness and movement activities can be maximised by doing them at prescribed times of the day. She's equally motivated by the subject of

women's health and fertility but is aware it's a complex field, which requires lots of follow-up support, and debates whether a tropical island is the best environment to deliver on this. Similarly, she sees a need to address the concerns of an elderly clientele aged 65-plus, but thinks Koh Samui lacks the necessary back-up medical facilities.

Finally, it's the million-dollar question: will there be other Kamalayas since the original is at full capacity? "If the right project came along, with the right synergy, we wouldn't say no," Karina concludes. "But we love what we're doing and don't feel we need multiple sites. Kamalaya can't be forced – growth has to be natural." ●

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