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# Experiences

TRAVELERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR

Edited by PETER TERZIAN



A vacation once signaled a reprieve from healthy habits (not that there's anything wrong with that). But these days we're increasingly building our travels around the quest to feel better in body, mind, and spirit. Now there's a destination to suit virtually any wellness desire, whether you want to sleep more soundly, overcome anxieties, improve your fitness, or just sit up a little straighter. From running races in far-flung locations to foraging on a Caribbean island, these are experiences that will change the way you approach each day, even after you've returned home.

**PLUS:** Our A-List travel advisors share their wellness tips.



## THE SHAPE OF YOU

A sun-drenched retreat in the Gulf of Thailand wants to improve your posture. **AMELIA LESTER** discovers the benefits of sitting up straight.

▲ The pondside café at Kamalaya, a resort on the Thai island of Koh Samui.

HERE WAS NOTHING WRONG with me when, earlier this year, I visited Kamalaya Wellness Sanctuary & Holistic Spa on Koh Samui, an island off Thailand. But there wasn't a lot right, either. I had given birth months earlier and was feeling depleted. I was planning to take part in Kamalaya's Structural Revival Program, designed to improve posture and realign the body. This sounded good. My default position since becoming a mother was a defensive crouch, the result of many hours spent nursing a baby while scrolling through Twitter. I was nervous about being away from home. Could I sleep in? Were phones allowed? Would there be wine?

The answer to all those questions turned out to be, Yes, if you'd like. Kamalaya doesn't do rules. "We're not a boot camp," said Karina Stewart, a cofounder of the resort and a practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine. "We start from an assumption of mutual respect." Structural Revival, which was created last year, is one of 14 wellness programs that use an array of holistic therapies. Others address concerns such as disturbed sleep, burnout, and coping with change.

Kamalaya's tranquil grounds, dotted with lotus ponds and crowned with a cave once used by Buddhist monks for meditation, immediately quiet the mind. But Kamalaya isn't just about treating guests' emotional states, as John Stewart, the resort's other founder and Karina's husband, made sure to emphasize. A Canadian who spent 16 years in the Himalayas as a Buddhist monk, he explained that Kamalaya has always had "amazing

practitioners for the body." These include massage therapists, physiotherapists, and personal trainers. "We saw that guests had a need to address physical imbalance, and that our structural practitioners were always booked. So we built a Pilates studio and introduced Structural Revival."

The deskbound, injured, and chronically idle are prime candidates for the program, but it's open to all who'd like to improve their bodily selves. A statuesque Danish woman told me she found the laid-back approach appealing. "This isn't a fat farm," she said. "Thank God for that."

Still, fat happens. I was reminded of this on my first day when I experienced my "bio-impedance analysis," which used electric currents in the hands and feet to measure body composition. In an office overlooking the curl of the resort's white-sand beach, a Canadian naturopath named Marissa Brennan sat down with me to review my results and prescribe a course of treatment for the week.

What I knew: my body fat percentage was not great. (Magnum Mini ice cream bars, it turns out, are not a food group.) What I didn't know: my hydration levels were low, and something called the "phase angle measurement," which detects cellular energy, indicated that I didn't have any. I told Marissa that because I was still breastfeeding, I didn't want to lose weight. My goal was simply to feel better in my body after months of inertia.

Marissa made commonsense recommendations for how to improve



▼ Exercising with a physiotherapist, a component of Kamalaya's Structural Revival Program.





◀ One of Kamalaya's two swimming pools.



A-LIST  
ADVICE

**What's  
your favorite  
way to  
unwind?**

**JONATHAN  
EPSTEIN, U.K. AND  
IRELAND EXPERT  
AT CELEBRATED  
EXPERIENCES:**

— "Few things are more relaxing to me than enjoying a whiskey in a beautiful hotel drawing room beside a fire. It's also hard to beat a great walk or hike in the countryside." *celebratedexperiences.com.*

my well-being. The three quarts of liquid I needed to drink every day didn't have to be water—coconut water, herbal tea, and vegetable juices were fine, too. It helped that fresh coconuts were everywhere, and that there was a lengthy menu of juices, smoothies, and coolers. The staff, who dressed in primrose-yellow linen uniforms, also gave me subtle nudges to promote healthy habits. At breakfast, for instance, the default choice was mulberry tea, said to improve concentration without the crash of coffee. After a few mornings, I had adjusted to a new normal.

More urgent was the evaluation I received from Sira Tumteerapong, one of four physiotherapists on site. An energetic twentysomething from Bangkok who goes by the nickname Mic, he immediately homed in on my weak core and slumped shoulders. "You will get bad back pain unless you do something now," he said, and demonstrated some remedial exercises. Then I was off to the first of two Pilates sessions, ideal for strengthening abdominal muscles and standing taller. My Thai teacher, Thunwipa Poomchaiya, known as Mew, was kind and patient, taking me through a gentle workout on the Reformer machine one day and some mat exercises the next. I found a 60-minute Thai therapeutic massage, involving sustained kneading focused on spots of tension around my overwrought scapulae, both soothing and transformative. I swear my shoulders sit an inch lower these days.

Then there was all the incidental exercise from climbing up and down the hillside on which Kamalaya is built. Hell-bent on active relaxation, I spent no time at the beach, and, during the day,

barely any in my room. This was a shame, since I had one of the 25 sea-view villas, which are furnished in a basic but elegant style of tropical minimalism and have balconies and semi-outdoor bathrooms. Almost all of the 76 rooms, even the more conventional hotel-style suites, feature private outdoor space—because, as Karina Stewart told me, "nature is the show here."

By my seventh night at Kamalaya, I noticed that the whites of my eyes shone bright in the mirror. I had been following Marissa's advice faithfully. Eating healthy wasn't something I had to think about, because the offerings were exceptional, from Thai classics to 1970s health food. (I didn't know I needed four different types of gluten-free bread until Kamalaya's breakfast buffet.) And after all the bodywork, I felt stretched like an extra-long hand-pulled noodle. But as relentlessly pleasurable as my trip had been, it was time to go home and get moving again. Mic's exercises are getting easier, I'm still on the mulberry tea, and most nights I forgo the Mini Magnums. Consider me structurally revived. ●

*kamalaya.com; five-night Structural Revival Program from \$2,866, including accommodations.*