

glimpsing *life's potential*

writer Rebecca Walker

I arrive at Kamalaya in dire need of a break. A never-ending yo-yo of deadlines, plane hopping, and more deadlines has worn me down. Combined with the relentless pace of life in Hong Kong and a bad habit of burning the candle at both ends, I feel physically drained, mentally fatigued and creatively depleted. Ironically, this exhausted combination is the perfect recipe for the soul healing retreat I am about to embark on for the next eight days. I have booked into Kamalaya's Balance and Revitalise Programme – a restorative package designed specifically for burnt out urbanites like myself. Promising to remedy the symptoms and underlying causes of adrenal fatigue and stress-related imbalance, I'm hoping this holistic holiday will recharge my batteries and lift my spirits. I can't think of anything better than pausing to regroup for a minute and as the plane touches down in Koh Samui, feel a weight lifting already.



DAY ONE

Although arriving at the resort the night before and being deposited straight to a spectacular room, I toss and turn all night as worries and thoughts of untied loose ends flit through my mind and I wake feeling grumpy. I have long battled with bouts of insomnia, and over the past few months have been gulping down coffee like there's no tomorrow to get through the days (which any doctor will tell you feeds the problem). I know full well that sleeplessness is a symptom of stress and is one of the key issues I'm keen to address during my stay, but first...breakfast!

After munching on a wholesome spread of fresh fruit, buckwheat pancakes, ginger tea and a wheatgrass shot I head over to the wellness centre for my lifestyle consultation. A friendly nurse named Maew weighs me, measures me, takes my blood pressure and has me lie down for a 'bioimpedance analysis' test. Designed to measure the body's cellular composition and health, this simple electronic test assesses tissue and fluid levels in the body, calculates your personal metabolic rate and evaluates your individual body mass index (BMI). Much to my horror, it also gives specific measurements of stored fat and (de)hydration levels. Despite practicing yoga regularly and being a healthy(ish) eater, I barely drink any water, do no cardio and live in one of the most polluted cities in the world, so I'm genuinely surprised when my results all come back within healthy range.

I am taken to another room to meet Australian naturopath, Joanne who talks me through my results and asks me about my medical history and some of my more persistent health ailments (namely insomnia, stress-related anxiety and digestive issues). She quickly confirms what I already suspected: that my body has been pumping out stress-induced cortisol and adrenalin for months, which has put strain on my adrenals, kidneys and liver. She assures me that the week's rejuvenating activities will rectify things and sends me on my way.

After a yummy lunch of sautéed glass noodles and fresh vegetables at the resort's

'Amrita' (divine nectar) Café, I enjoy a liver-cleansing beetroot, cucumber, carrot and ginger juice, before heading back to the wellness centre for a Vital Essence Oil Massage. My therapist Jazz hones in on my tension-riddled shoulders, unknotting my muscle kinks with gentle ease and within minutes I feel myself slip into relaxation mode.

After my massage, I take a quick dip in the ocean and a lazy beachside snooze before walking to 'Soma' (food of the gods) Restaurant for dinner. I enjoy a pot of detox vegetable broth (which turns out to be iridescent green and tastes amazing!), accompanied by some buckwheat soba noodles and sautéed vegetables with pesto. By 9.30pm I am tucked in bed.

DAY TWO

My alarm goes off at 7.30 am and as I roll over to switch it off, it dawns on me that I've just slept for 10 hours straight. I jump out of bed and climb up the resort's (very steep!) hill for morning yoga. I'm used to practising in a crowded studio among the skyscrapers of Hong Kong's central district, so wandering into Kamalaya's spacious open-air pavilion surrounded by nature and a glistening ocean panorama, is a very welcome change. As it turns out, I am the only one to turn up so lucky for me, I have the instructor, Rose, all to myself for the next 90 minutes. We ease our way into a gentle 'yin' practice, performing a variety of deep stretches before moving into a more active series of 'yang' poses for the last hour.

I swig down a wheatgrass shot followed by a light breakfast of fresh fruit and nuts, then read my book on the deck until it's time for my first treatment for the day: a Chi Nei Tsang massage. Said to release stored emotional and psychological stress, this somewhat intense therapy focuses on the stomach and entails a massage sequence of deep circular movements in which the therapist uses their thumbs, hands, forearms and elbows to stimulate internal organs and balance the nervous system. Unique to Thailand, it supports Taoist theory, which considers the gut as the body's 'second brain'. I was diagnosed with coeliac disease more than 10 years ago so



my stomach is temperamental at the best of times. Consequently, having someone massaging the most sensitive part of my body (which also happens to be the body's emotional centre) has me wincing at times but Nana's expert touch puts me at ease and I eventually relax and even find myself nodding off at times.

For lunch I order vegetable mulligan and wash it down with a fresh coconut. A bowl filled with Chinese broccoli, bok choy, shitake and enoki mushrooms in a tasty green broth arrives and I can feel the nutrients from each bite being instantly absorbed by my city-depleted cells. Feeling suitably nourished, I make my way to the spa for a 60-minute Indian Head Massage and am pleasantly surprised to discover the treatment also includes a back, neck and shoulder rub.

My therapist Noi burrows her fingers deep into the knots of my shoulders and laughs as she tells me "an hour is not enough for you!" Moving up to my neck and head, she pours warm coconut oil through my hair and starts to knead my temples and

skull before using deep thumb and finger pressure to unknot the tension in my jaw. By this stage I am close to drooling and as she glides to the pressure points at the base of my head, feel months of tension leaving my body.

After my massage, I levitate to the infrared sauna. Unlike usual saunas which induce 'superficial' sweat, infrared therapy heats the body from the inside out at a temperature of 42 to 45 degrees. A 'magic microwave' of sorts, it is said to aid to stimulate circulation, boost immunity, increase metabolism, burn calories, reduce heavy metal accumulation, reduce cellulite, promote skin cell rejuvenation, decrease muscle inflammation and unburden the body of toxins. I sweat it out inside for 30 minutes, before taking a cool shower and heading straight to Soma for a delicious dinner of black cod on a bed of asparagus. A yummy end to a purifying day.

DAY THREE

I wake early and when I go to wash my face, look in the mirror only to discover...a giant

pimple on my cheek! I never suffered from acne or pimples as a teenager so I'm slightly affronted by this giant red specimen. I take comfort in the knowledge that this is a sign of toxin elimination and run to yoga class where Rose guides me through a series of twists, inversions and backbends.

After yoga, I wolf down a healthy breakfast of fruit, nuts and rice dumplings before heading to the wellness centre for a Chinese medicine consultation. My doctor Kanittha sits me down and asks me about any physical symptoms that are bothering me, then presses me further to ask why I think I've developed them. I am impressed and slightly rattled by her forthright manner and knowing smile, and hear all sorts of emotional truths tumbling out of my mouth. When I tell her I've noticed my body has been retaining more fluid than usual lately, she cocks an eyebrow and asks "what are you holding onto Rebecca?" When I complain of indigestion and bloating after meals, she challenges me with, "What are you resisting in your life?" I go on to tell

her about my nocturnal restlessness and she retorts "What is affecting your peace of mind?"

These are all very, VERY good questions. Some of which I have answers for, many of which make me squirm anxiously in my seat. Kanittha guides me to the massage table where she checks my tongue and pulse then tells me to breathe deeply as she proceeds to pinpoint (literally!), my tender spots with needles. I have had acupuncture before but Kanittha's precise method is truly impressive and her intuitive accuracy, spot on. A number of involuntary 'ow's!' escape me as she needles my legs, feet and stomach and I'm surprised to feel a dull ache throbbing through each point, as though charged with an electrical current. I breathe into the feeling and open my mind and body to the healing powers of this ancient technique.

After a healthy lunch and inspirational chat with Kamalaya owners, Karina and John Stewart, I head to my naturopathic consultation with Joanne. She picks up

where we left off a few days before and tells me I've become dependent on my sympathetic nervous system which has put my body into fight/flight mode and caused imbalance in my autonomic nervous system. We talk through my diet and she makes a number of recommendations including increasing my protein intake, sticking to anti-inflammatory foods such as salmon, papaya and broccoli, and sipping on mulberry tea instead of coffee. Among other things, she also recommends I take magnesium supplements, omega 3 and an adrenal tonic formula for the next three months.

Afterwards I head to Kamalaya's steam cavern and bask in the foggy warmth. Although I haven't actually 'done' anything, I feel utterly exhausted from health information overload and head to dinner at 6.30 pm. My eyelids feel heavy and I wander back to my room in anticipation of

THIS PAGE: View of the main pool. OPPOSITE PAGE: Chi Nei Tsang massage. OPENING PAGE: Spa guest relaxing poolside.



some decent zzz's. Much to my frustration, sleep eludes me and I spend most of the night staring at the ceiling in sleepy contemplation.

DAY FOUR

After a sleepless night, I decide to treat myself to a lie-in and late breakfast before walking to the spa for a Royal Ayurvedic treatment. Indian therapist Ruby greets me with a warm smile and within minutes I am face down as she pours warm oil all over my body, before beginning a series of dynamic rubbing, tapping, pinching and kneading techniques. Said to increase circulation while nourishing and calming the nervous system, this rejuvenating massage is simultaneously stimulating and relaxing and I feel suitably recharged by the time it finishes.

I eat a raw Pad Thai for lunch, before returning to the wellness centre for my second acupuncture session. Along with the needles, Kanittha performs some cupping on my stomach (said to release blockages and improve circulation), and burns mugwort over specific energy points (said to increase

vital energy). "Even if they are attached to a painful memory, let your thoughts surface, but learn to observe them with detachment," Kanittha encourages. "Acknowledge them, examine them, but don't let them control you." She takes my hand and clenches it into a fist. "You must learn to let go. Release your grip and let things flow," she smiles serenely. "Yesterday is over and so is the old Rebecca. There is no point holding onto what no longer exists."

After a seaside sunbake and dip in the ocean, I head to fitball class. Trainer, Klack, launches straight into action and six of us bounce our way through a thoroughly exhausting warm-up to some pumping techno tunes. Klack then leads us into a series of core balances, hamstring strengtheners, push-ups and killer ab crunches, all of which I find incredibly challenging. I'm not alone. Everyone is moaning and groaning, however Klack's enthusiasm is contagious and the mood is light. By the time we finish I am equally fatigued and uplifted and make a mental note to start including cardio in my (non-existent) fitness repertoire when I get back to Hong Kong.

I go straight from the class to the infrared sauna and soon discover this is a very bad idea. As previously mentioned, infrared saunas heat the body from the inside out, so when you're already sweating profusely from recent exercise, your body temperature spikes within minutes of being inside. 30 sweaty minutes pass by and I emerge to witness a stunning sunset. A fresh breeze dances around the outdoor deck accompanied by a soundtrack of rustling leaves and as I watch dusk melt into evening, a deep sense of peaceful contentment washes over me.

DAY FIVE

I wake with aching muscles and a feeling of heavy fatigue but go to morning yoga anyway, hoping it will lift my energy. There are six of us in class and together we bend and stretch our way through a series of hip, thigh and torso openers. Although I'm enjoying the practice, I feel tired and distracted and find it difficult to bring my focus into my body. By the time I sit down for breakfast I feel ravenous and devour double my usual serving of fruit

and buckwheat pancakes.

I wander back to my room and attempt to do some writing but can feel a slow, yet ferocious headache taking hold. I try to ignore it but am suddenly hit by a bout of nausea that has me doubled in two. I lie on the couch and crawl into fetal position hoping it might pass, but one hour later am feeling worse and succumb to sleep in a bid for relief. I can sense my body ridding itself of toxins and stagnant energy, so try to meditate my way through the discomfort but by 3pm I am still horizontal and feeling truly dreadful, so finally call the wellness centre for advice. Naturopath Emma tells me this is all part of the detox process and prescribes a dose of homeopathic drops to quell the nausea which I wash down with a glass of hydrating salts. I resume fetal position, slurp down a nourishing bowl of okra and cauliflower stew before crawling into bed at 9pm, where I thankfully, fall straight to sleep.

DAY SIX

I wake up at 5am feeling completely different. My headache has lifted, my limbs feel light and the nausea has disappeared. I look at the clock and try to go back to sleep but after 20 minutes, decide to get up and face a week's worth of emails. Although dealing with work is the last thing I feel like doing, it actually relaxes me to know I'm on top of things and I bound to breakfast a few hours later feeling great. I mix up my usual morning staples with some boiled eggs and wander from breakfast to the resort's 'Arjan' cave temple to meditate. Originally used by

Buddhist monks as a meditative retreat, this sacred space is centuries old and emanates a powerful spiritual energy, making it the perfect place for quiet contemplation.

I meditate for an hour or so then head to the wellness centre for my stress management session with former monk and Buddhist teacher, Rajesh. Immediately upon meeting him I feel a sense of anticipation take hold, something tells me he is a man who has found peace, and I am curious to see if he can help me find mine. We begin by talking about the key causes of stress in my life and at the top of the list comes work. When discussing my sleeping difficulties he gives me practical advice. "The mind is like a computer, if you give it data to process before you go to sleep, it won't rest until it has found a solution," says Rajesh. "There is no solution in thinking." He goes on to tell me I need to shift my energy from my head to my heart before going to bed. "To do this, simply imagine things that have made you happy that day, or joyful memories in general. Bathe in that feeling and hold it in your heart as you go to sleep."

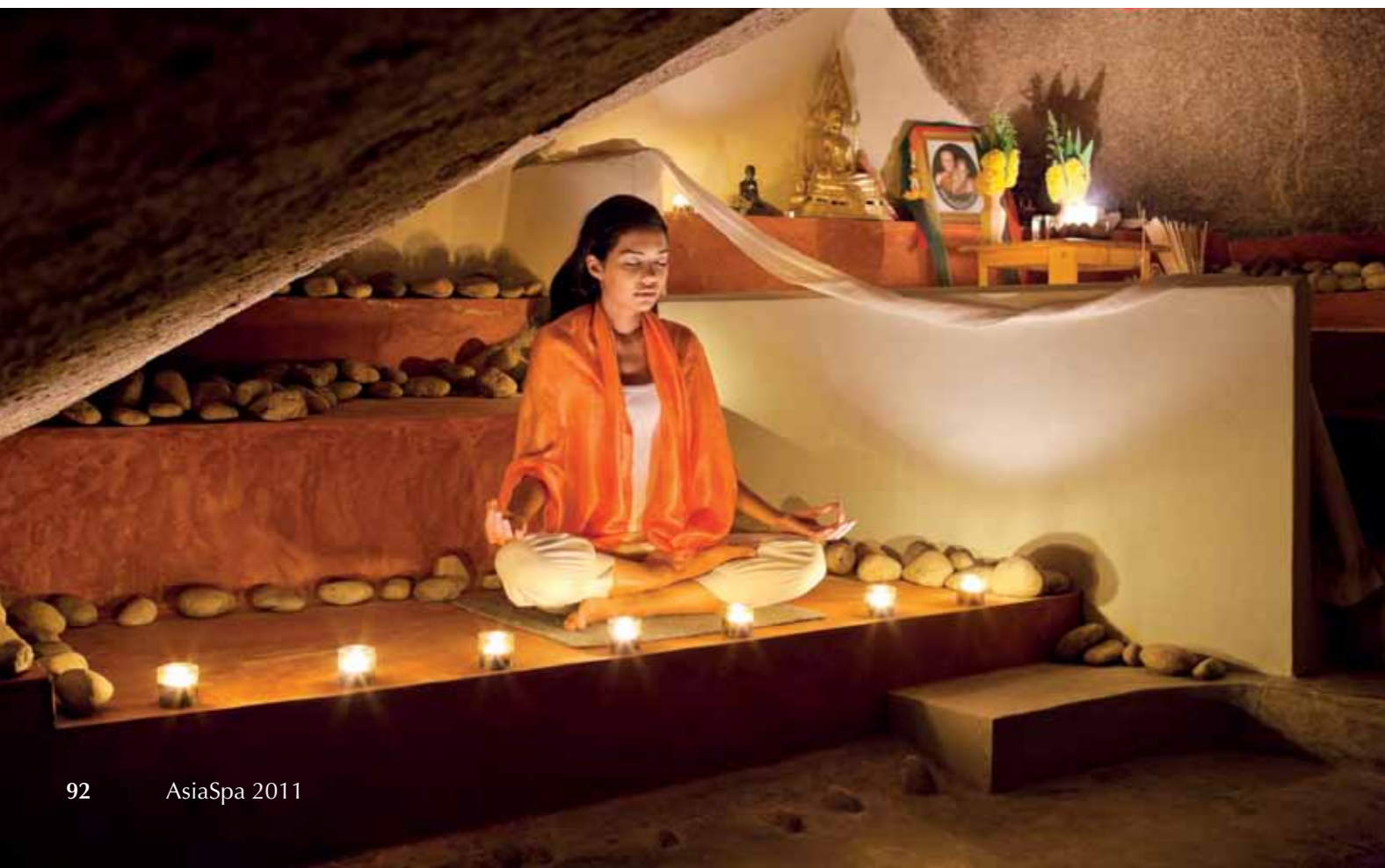
I tell Rajesh about the many retreats and various spiritual paths I've explored over the last 18 months and his advice is clear and to the point. "The more you search, the more you'll find," he smiles. "But it is also easy to get lost if you don't focus on one path and practice it consistently. Spirituality is as simple as or as complex as you make it. If the basic act of sitting quietly and breathing in and out with awareness helps you feel grounded and connected, do it

daily." We then dive into a discussion about fear, trust and acceptance. As I point out, I attribute much of my mental stress to fear of the future and sentimental nostalgia for the past, to which he retorts, "Acceptance is absence of resistance. Once you accept that you can't control everything, you will stop trying to resist life's natural flow." His words are eerily similar to Kanittha's earlier in the week and I know there is truth and wisdom in them.

We go on to discuss the concept of emotional stress and talk about some of the more challenging events and relationships I've encountered in my life. One event in particular (related to a broken heart), strikes an emotional nerve and when Rajesh asks me if I want to clear the pain associated with its memory I nod my head in silent tears. I lie down and he talks me through a visual meditation in which he takes me back in time and asks me to have a silent conversation with my younger self and former partner.

Emotions quickly bubble to the surface and within minutes I am crying. Rajesh responds by placing a calming hand on my head, and another on my belly; I sense a strong current of energy pass through my body, at which point the ache in my chest and throat begin to melt. We continue this process for about 30 minutes as Rajesh guides me deeper into the past. The exercise

THIS PAGE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Herbal compress ingredients; outdoor yoga; healthy cuisine. OPPOSITE PAGE: Meditation in the Arjan cave temple.

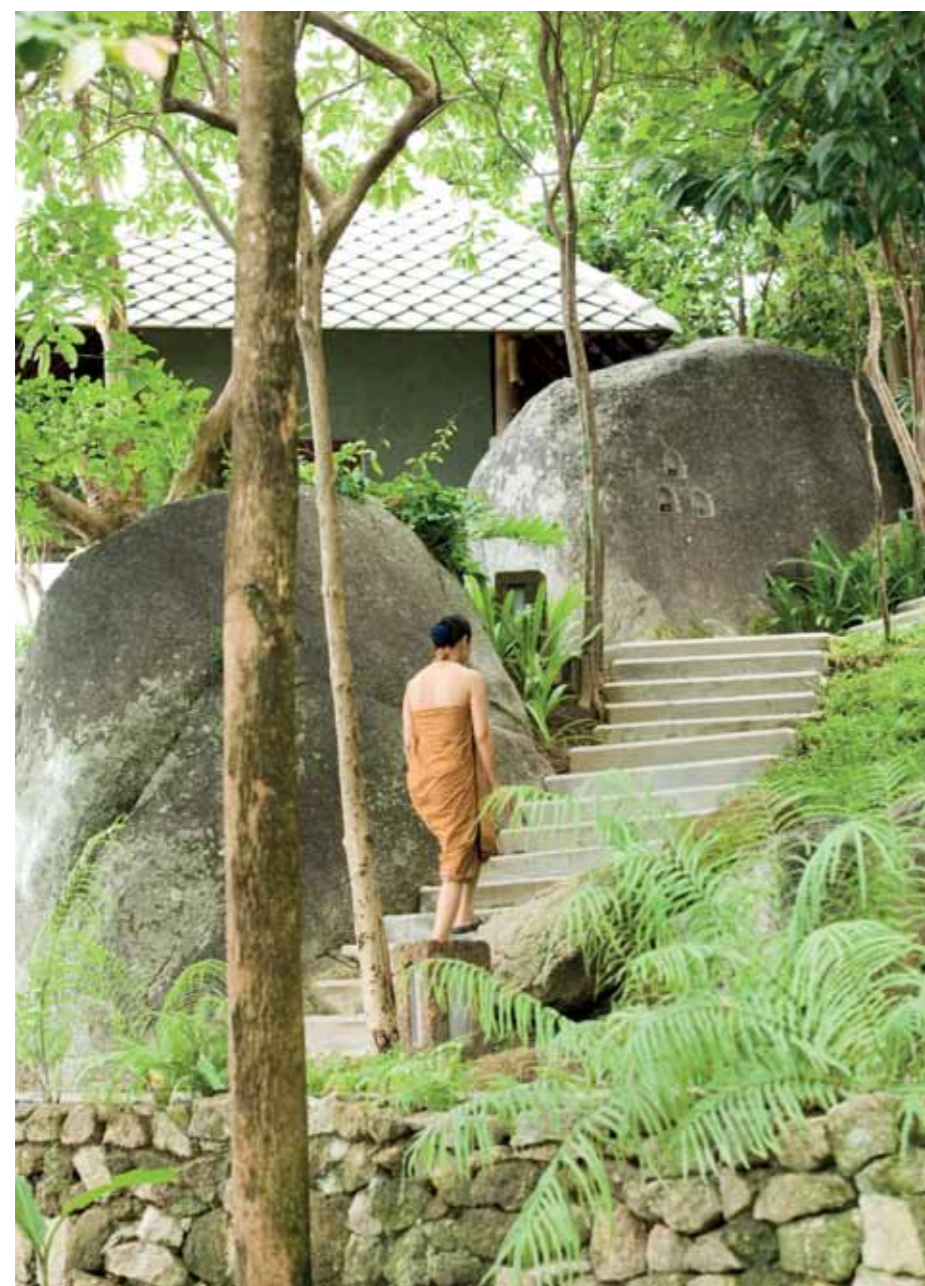


is both intense and illuminating, and by the time we finish I feel as though I've gained insight into parts of myself that have been concealed behind layers of self preservation for years.

I leave Rajesh feeling exhausted, yet 'light' and head back to my room for a quick lie down. I opt for vegetable mulligan and a carrot juice for lunch before heading to my third and final TCM treatment. Kanittha examines my tongue and tells me there is less 'damp' in my body than my first treatment. She also brings up the concept of ying/yang balance and tells me I have too much yang (masculine energy) in my body. According to ancient Chinese medicine principles, yang energy can be compared to fire in the body, while yin relates to water.

As Kanittha explains, the excess fire in my system has put strain on my kidneys, a yin organ that, among other things, filters waste and controls the balance of fluids in the body. The kidneys are closely related to the adrenal glands and Kanittha encourages me to nourish them by drinking more water and eating lots of green leafy vegetables.

After an epic morning of healing I'm feeling a tad fragile, but have an appointment for a traditional Asian hand massage at the spa so I dreamily make my way there. My therapist Piau takes me to an outdoor platform where a comfortable mattress and eye pillow awaits. Within minutes I've sunk into a blissful haze as Piau stretches my hands and fingers and starts massaging the joints between my



fingers, wrists and arms. Said to open the energy channels of the chest, lungs and heart centre to the flow of joy, love and bliss, this Korean-inspired treatment helps release accumulated emotional stress, particularly sadness and grief. After a blissful 45 minutes, I wander to the steam cavern to sweat it out for 20 minutes then spend the rest of the afternoon lazing by the pool.

DAY 7

I sleep in, eat a leisurely breakfast and devote the entire day to writing. I am used to working in an open-plan office on the 29th floor, so having the opportunity to write on a quiet verandah, surrounded by birdsong and nature is a true gift. I am the queen of multi-tasking and usually when I write, I am simultaneously answering e-mails, talking on the phone, editing another writer's piece, laying out stories with my designer and running to meetings, all the while trying to keep my focus in our somewhat noisy office space. Here on the other hand, I can hear myself think and while I'll admit the ocean views are at times distracting, with a single task to focus on, my thoughts flow effortlessly onto the page.

For lunch I sip on some carrot shitake soup with steamed vegetables before heading to the wellness centre for a traditional Asian foot massage. Borrowing from traditional Chinese medicine principles, this therapy

is said to stimulate body organs and tissues and improve overall wellbeing. My therapist Ray lathers my feet and calves with Tiger Balm and I imagine my liver and tummy sighing in relief as she digs her thumbs deep into the pressure points of my muscles and tendons. I follow this with my third and final session in the infrared sauna then enjoy an early dinner of grilled salmon and steamed vegetables at Soma.

DAY 8

My final day begins with an Ayurvedic treatment called 'Kata Vasti'. Focusing specifically on the lower back, this soothing therapy is a wonderful remedy for chronic back pain and is said to rebalance psychological states relating to fear, shock and the feeling of lack of support in life. Ruby spills oil over my back and begins a quick, yet vigorous body massage then melds a strip of medicinal clay in the shape of a ring in my lower back.

Pouring warm oil into the centre of the circle a little bit at a time, Ruby begins to stir the mixture in stimulating circles and although she's not touching the skin, I feel my energy respond immediately. Along with feeling deeply soothed, a tingling sensation begins to stir in my legs and travels all the way up to the base of my head. After 30 minutes, Ruby removes the oil with hot towels then begins a deep pressure massage

that has me literally melting on the bed.

I feel a distinct shift in my body after the treatment and head straight to the temple cave to meditate. My mind feels quiet and I sit quietly until a grumbling stomach tells me its lunchtime. After devouring a delicious lemongrass and coconut stew at Amrita I return to the spa for my final treatment – an Ayurvedic therapy named Shirodhara. Working primarily on the body's 'manomaya kosha' (mental sheath), Shirodhara is a restorative technique in which a warm stream of medicated oil is poured continuously on the forehead or 'third eye', which in turn energises the 'nadis' (energy channels), balances the nervous system and aids mental clarity.

My therapist Asha begins with a brief but vigorous head, neck and back rub before flipping me to my back. As oil flows onto my forehead and spills into my hair, I feel a deeply calming sensation sweep over me. In my day-to-day life, I spend much of my time frowning at a computer screen, so having warm oil dribbled over this mental tension zone is true bliss. I feel as though I am floating above myself on the bed and it takes all my effort to snap out of my tranquil bubble when the treatment finishes. I spend the rest of the evening in a state of relaxed zen and after a nourishing dinner of steamed sea bass and vegetables, float my way to bed where I promptly fall asleep.

THIS PAGE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Healthy cuisine ingredients; Shirodhara treatment; swing. OPPOSITE PAGE: Spa guest walking to treatment.

RETROSPECTIVE

As someone who is excitable, to the point of hyper at times, I have often compared myself to a wind-up doll that springs to life at rapid speed before exhausting itself and grinding to a sudden halt. Yet after eight days of nourishing healing I feel as though I am thinking and moving in slow motion. Thoughts come one at a time, instead of trampling each other, and the niggling worries that were at the forefront of my mind when I arrived have been put on mute.

My perspective has shifted and along with feeling energetically balanced, my spirit feels grounded, centered and peaceful. Above all else, a deep sense of calm reigns and as I pack my things to leave, remember something Karina said to me a few days before. "No matter what clouds come and go, never forget you are the sky." Inevitably my newfound sense of peace will be tested as soon as I leave Kamalaya's nurturing bubble, however even glimpsing this more serene version of myself is a revelation unto itself and I am infinitely grateful for the experience.

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