

MY SAVVY TRAVELLER

THAILAND HEALTH RESORT'S APPROACH ENCOMPASSES EVERYTHING FROM CANCER RECOVERY TO A LITTLE FACIAL REJUVENATION.

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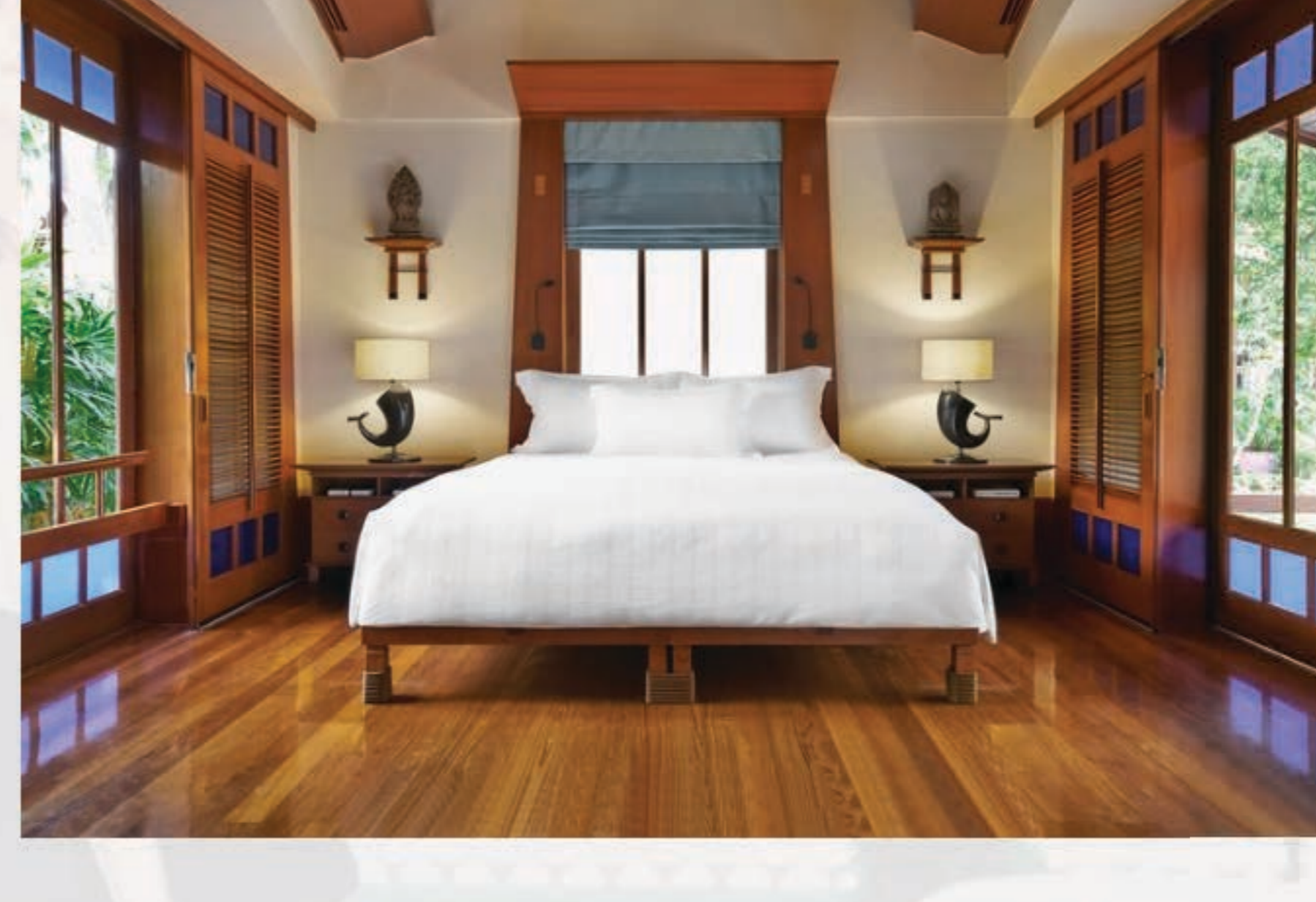
Chiva-Som was recently awarded 'The World's Best Destination Spa' in the Conde Nast Traveller Magazine UK readers' traveller awards 2016

By Shannon Melnyk

Destination: Hua Hin. Not your typical Thailand hot spot, though arguably an insider's gem with an idyllic stretch of beach on the Gulf of Thailand - and a much lauded market Bangkok locals will drive three hours to visit. But I haven't come for the Singha beer soaked holiday, nor the handmade contemporary goods worthy of a Nordstrom's pop up shop. I've arrived at a private compound in search of a health transformation worthy of over 30 hours of travel and foregoing my electronics for a week.

Chiva-Som, is an international health resort with a global reputation; here for over twenty years and considered pioneers of the spa resort concept, its evolution, I've learned, has reflected the times and the needs of modern-day health issues - to the extent of earning accolades for everything from world's best destination spa and best medical services to first place green spa awards.

When you think "spa" or "health resort", often fluffy robes, detox or boot camps come to mind. But the immense variety of practitioners and treatments available at Chiva-Som are so expansive and ambitious - that one only needs to see the customized retreat list to discover an entirely different experience lies ahead. I'm not here to lose ten pounds or perfect my downward dog pose, although both of those are options here; I've enlisted in a program to address chronic health issues that include auto-immune flare-ups and severe insomnia. I'm not looking for a cure, but some tools to take home and perhaps a journey that will make me remember what it felt like not to be wound up, permanently hunched over and attached to a screen, living in the future or the past, and in a space that day-to-day worries are piled up like some kind of stress junkyard. After having been to many spas, however, my hopes high, my expectations low.



Even in a deep slumber your body and mind will appreciate the comfort and serenity of Chiva-Som

I'm surprised to be greeted by a Canadian. Sheila McCann is Chiva-Som's General Manager and has been in the wellness industry for over thirty years. She is part of a highly progressive agenda that includes the Chiva-Som organic farms, sustainable development practices and environmentally friendly hospitality and spa products, not to mention new health innovations and luxury surroundings. She's what I would describe as corporate zen, if there ever was such a thing. She's proud of their new custom retreats, mine being one of them.

"We recognize patterns of the increasing numbers of guests coming to us with specific conditions that benefit from diet and lifestyle interventions, McCann tells me. "We see the results of different synergistic combinations of treatments with exercise, attitude and empowerment of the individual. The latest research and a design-thinking approach has been used by our Health and Wellness Professionals to review 'what works', 'what if' and what wows' to create the new retreats."

Some of these programs encompass everything from Cell Vitality for those recovering from cancer, to Cranial Relief, Emotional Well-being, or Medi-spa packages that focus on modern aesthetic beauty treatments and micro-invasive cosmetic surgery. Of course, intensive programs for stress, yoga, fitness, performance, detox and weight loss are also options. Prior to your stay, you've already filled out a mountain of paperwork, and by the time you arrive for your first consultation, there's a chance that your treatments and classes could pull from any of these, as your program is highly customized. If I had any delusions about sitting by the pool, they were gone by the time I saw the 25 plus appointments on with consulting doctors, naturopaths, fitness instructors, spa therapists, nutritionists and alternative health practitioners.

Post welcome green ginger chia elixir, I'm escorted via golf cart to the pavilion where my accommodations await. The resort, while it has a sort of grandness, has only 54 guest rooms. Chiva-Som, Thai for "haven of life", has a stately, authentic Thai aesthetic and a peaceful vibe: no robe-clad maniacs taking selfies or on their laptops - guests come and go, almost invisibly, as do the gentle-hearted, kind staff. The rooms are elegantly appointed; modern and sleek with silk fabrics natural muted wood accents. High-tech features also offer lighting that provide different settings throughout the day and touch pad toilets/bidets are among the luxurious pluses.

I pad around in a robe or what is best described as spa jammies to my various classes, consultations and treatments. Given this year's recent eye-opening Frontline investigation into the dangers and fraudulent nature of the health supplement industry, I find it immediately refreshing when naturopath Jason Culp is not supplement-happy, but rather more interested in my cortisol patterns and the way I breathe. He conducts some tests and asks me to do some very simple homework as well as make some changes to my program so I can see various breathing coaches. I also see a physiotherapist and a visiting Rolfer from Singapore who treats me for pain through structural integration. I experience acupuncture, Chi Nei Tsang (a digestive based organ massage) and stress therapy release. I learn different methods of meditation. I take Pilates and Ai Chi in the water; I have a variety of daily massages, including reflexology, Oriental scalp massage and traditional Thai massage. I even have a hypnotherapy session with a psychologist from Australia. Surprisingly, I have time for strolls down the beach, an organic farm tour and a Thai Culinary Class to learn about cooking and eating according to the Chiva-Som concept.

Spa food done the Thai way, I've learned, is a beautiful thing, even if you have dietary restrictions. The access to unworldly fruits and vegetables we don't have the pleasure to enjoy in the West, combined with Authentic Thai flavours - makes for exceptional dining experiences befitting a five-star resort. I discuss food synergy, organic and GMO free ingredients, nutrition and presentation - all among the ten pillars of Chiva-Som cuisine - with the charismatic and globally celebrated Chef Paisarn Cheewinsiriwat. With a French Classic background, Cheewinsiriwat achieves a unique alchemy of Asian, Thai and Western soul food. I'm happy to take home the hardcover Cooking with Light, a comprehensive collection of the Cuisine Director's Chiva-Som recipes, along with a jar of freshly made black sesame spread that is my new breakfast comfort food.



Spa food done the Thai way...is a beautiful thing! Cuisine Director, Chef Paisorn, works his magic in the kitchen.

Suddenly I'm in Taipei staring at a pink Hello Kitty payphone; It looks odd and not of this world. I'm not sure if this is the Chiva-Som effect, or it's because I'm in Taipei staring at a Hello Kitty payphone. I feel as if I'm in someone else's body, and I hope it lasts. If not, I've taken home some tips, tools and memories to continue on my health journey. www.chivasom.com

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