



Detoxing in THAILAND

Victoria Jenkins find she loses her Western stress levels – along with quite a few pounds – at a luxurious spa near Chaweng, Thailand

Chelt enham – a freezing dank winter's night. The island of Koh Samui (some 15 hours later) – the warmth of the late afternoon sun nursed me as I stepped down from the plane and walked into the thatched roof airport to collect my luggage.

A car was waiting to whisk me to the Absolute Sanctuary Spa near Chaweng and as we swept up the drive my first impressions of my home for the next week were the mass of banana and coconut palms and the turquoise shimmer of the vast infinity pool.

In fact so balmy was the December

weather that within half an hour of arriving I was swimming in the pool – its salt water so warm that I could just step into it. There were jungle-covered hills all around, lights glowing as dusk fell early but best of all was the tropical heat that lifted the spirits straight away and made the UK feel a universe away...

The Absolute Sanctuary was begun five years ago by a Thai business woman who already had a successful yoga studio in Bangkok and in no time at all it has become one of the leading spas in South East Asia, catering for the walking well who would like to become better. It is not for the addicted or the sick but for those

who wish to detox, or eat healthily or practice intensive yoga courses.

My apartment was Moorish in theme as are all 38 rooms and was a stone's throw from the tropical pool, where I was to spend as much time as possible.

"Have dinner tonight and then tomorrow after your health assessment you'll begin the detox," said Apple, the Thai assistant. The only drawback was that I was detoxing in a country where the food is exquisite, as was confirmed when I later dined on a fragrant potato and coconut curry, beautifully cooked and served with steamed nutty-tasting brown rice.

Next morning by the pool I began with my first detox drink – a pineapple and lemon grass smoothie with bentonite clay and psyllium added for bulk. Then I met Will, an American naturopath, who explained that refined carbohydrates, such as 'enriched' bread, white rice, pasta, fruit-flavoured drinks, potatoes and in fact anything starchy or sweet, were the foods that turned to glucose in the body and then to fat. This sort of fat tends to gather round the middle in the middle-aged and eating fat itself is not the sole cause. I queried the coconut curry, only to be told that it had mostly consisted of tofu and other vegetables and that coconut is a health food – in fact coconut juice was in transfusions in place of blood plasma during emergencies in the last war. Cooked cheese, by the way, has a habit to glue itself to the walls of your intestines.

From Will I went for my first detox massage designed to speed up lymphatic drainage; it was a light massage but the tiny Thai masseuse even used her elbows to unravel the knots in my shoulders.

From then on it seemed that every time I sat down I was served with a drink – either a delicious sweet ginger tea, a coconut juice, a green shot of chlorophyll, clear vegetable broth, another clay-based smoothie (either fruit or vegetable) or just to be supplied with electrolytes via lemon grass tea.

These smoothies – served four times a day – were so very filling that hunger was not a problem. Nor did I have the expected headache from the sudden drop in caffeine levels.

Then came the dreaded daily colonic irrigation. "If Princess Diana can do it..." I thought. In fact it was fine, just a little



tedious and aimed to assist a liver congested by a Western diet. But there were gruesome tales galore of those previous guests who had discovered coins and buttons swallowed in childhood and, much worse, unsuspected parasites!

So the days passed – four smoothies a day as meal replacements and as many drinks as you wished of the others mentioned above (excepting the coconut juice which was limited to one daily.) There was also a daily detox massage and in my case as much swimming as possible. Meditation and yoga classes were available plus an assortment of beauty treatments from pedicures to Indian head massages; there was also a car and driver to take you into nearby Chaweng town and its beaches.

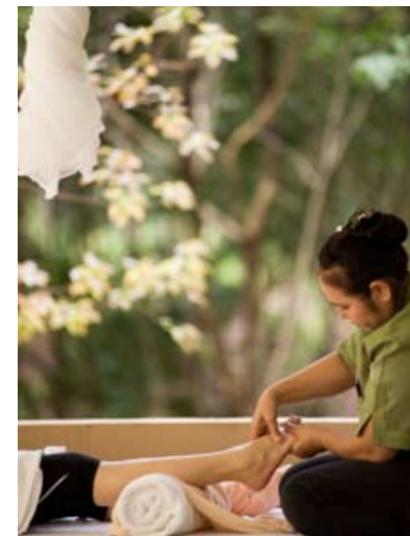
The guests came in all sizes and ages from the tall and stately blonde German policewoman, the American economist who had emigrated to Australia ahead of the USA's problems and the Singaporean banker who planned to go onwards to Bangkok to thank the four-sided Buddha in Siam Road for granting her a wish made the year before. In the main the guests were mainly single professional women but although men were thin on the ground they ARE welcome! There was great camaraderie among the detoxers and on two evenings I and new friends took the bus into the vibrant town of Chaweng where we resisted lobsters grilling on the barbecues (costing only £5!) and virtuously drank bottled water while buying local crafts.

On the sixth day I began to eat again – starting with enzyme-loaded raw vegetables – but found I had lost my appetite along with quite a few pounds and inches. On the seventh day I sadly

said farewell to the beautiful sanctuary and took with me the dietary mantra – eat three handfuls of vegetables per meal to one of protein (preferably fish or poultry) and one of carbohydrate (preferably brown rice for its lower glucose levels and toxin-absorbing qualities).

But I did not travel far, for I wanted to try something quite different and it took just a short car drive to the luxurious Akaryn Resort Hotel. This is right on the beach – and here I found that even the sea was warm enough to walk straight into. This is Hanuman Bay, named after the monkey god who is its guardian and its white sands give onto the Gulf of Thailand. The 52-room Akaryn only opened in April 2012 and typifies the idea that when Asia does luxury it really does luxury – from the heavy floor to ceiling Thai silk curtains in my villa to the Jacuzzi pool just outside on the decking and the three restaurants specialising in different cuisines. This boutique hotel already features in the International Small Luxury Hotels Guide.

Two nights later I dined under the stars with the Akaryn's manager Alex Castaldi and in deference to my detox he chose a hand-cooked tapas menu from the Ochos Restaurant. As we listened to the waves sighing on the beach below we began with glasses of Prosecco with mango and strawberry 'caviar' followed by salmon tartare, tomato-stuffed lamb, jamon pata negra with tomato caviar, ratatouille with goat's cheese ice cream, more Prosecco... it was bliss to find that food could taste even better than I had dreamed of during the detox. Breakfast was again served on the terrace overlooking the surf (I usually chose Oriental food such as noodles with chicken and vegetables) and I spent my



two-day visit either in one of the two swimming pools, a stone's throw from the beach, or on the beach itself. I also had an oil-free Thai massage for which I remained dressed but found myself being pressed and stretched while the masseuse's elbows came into play again. You hope to rise invigorated but in fact find yourself heading for the nearest sun lounger, the stress draining out of you, leaving you longing for a nap. You can get married at the Akaryn – on the beach if you like – but watch out for the sun as even in December it will give you a tan and explains why nearby Hong-Kongers (a three hour flight away) escape here during their chillier winter months. But the resort was filled with families seemingly from all over the world from the USA to Russia and not only did they swim, but took out kayaks and even explored the underwater reef in the bay that the hotel had created to help marine life.

What else about Koh Samui? It is an hour's flight from the capital Bangkok and quite far south which explains its wonderful warmth. Until the 1970s it did not even have roads but I was amazed to find Boots and Tesco stores in Chaweng, thanks to the booming tourist industry. The beaches are clean and sandy and are one of the main draws, along with the sun



and the deliciously fragrant and spicy food but be sure to avoid the monsoon season in the autumn. Whatmore, the island was untouched by the disastrous tsunami of a few years ago as it is on the east coast while it was the west coast that was affected.

After ten days in Thailand I reluctantly said goodbye to this wonderfully balmy island and flew on to Hong Kong – but that's another story. ■

Absolute Sanctuary
www.absolutesanctuary.com
Akaryn Resort & Spa www.akaryn.com



HOT TIPS *and* HIDDEN GEMS

Hot tips...

Don't be afraid to eat street food. Most of our travellers appreciate fine dining, but rarely do they return home raving about the Michelin-starred restaurant they visited while away – they expect the food served here to be amazing. More often they return waxing lyrical about some local delicacy they picked up for less than \$1 on a street-corner. This is real food, tried and tested over centuries, irrespective of the latest fad. But its more than the food – it's the banter with the vendor, it's the street-level view of the city or town you find yourself in, it's about understanding more about the ingredients being cooked right in front of you and the local etiquette you find yourself unwittingly following. And more often than not, it is simply the best taste sensation, one you will find hard to replicate in the fanciest restaurants. Never is this truer than in Indochina. Indeed, for travellers heading to Vietnam we always recommend a tour of the street

markets of Hanoi as an essential beginning to the trip, to introduce our guests to this street food scene before they travel south through the country. Only being confident ordering and enjoying these treats does Vietnam truly come to life.

... and hidden gems

In our view, for the most authentic African safari, it has to be Zambia. Yes, Botswana has the abundant game of the Okavango Delta, Kenya has the spectacular migration in the Masai Mara, South Africa has the luxury and sophistication of some of the world's most fashionable safari lodges and Tanzania has the endless plains of the Serengeti. All wonderful experiences. But Zambia – low key and less expensive – is worthy of its epithet, 'The Real Africa'. Zambia is where the concept of the walking safari was pioneered. Hurling around in a safari jeep is pursuit of The Big Five is certainly exciting. However

Zambia affords you the opportunity to explore Africa up close and personal... the Little Five are equally enthralling and – on foot – Africa's charms are even more apparent for true safari aficionados. That's not to say that the big game does not exist - you simply have look for it amidst the ruggedly beautiful bush, making each sighting more rewarding. Indeed, the concentration of wildlife that lives around the Luangwa River is one of the highest in Africa. Pods of hippos, numbering in their hundreds, co-exist with lion, leopard and elephant, unique species of zebra and giraffe and rare African wild dog as well as over 400 species of birds. For many safaris enthusiasts, Zambia is the ultimate destination. Oh, and it's got a rather large and famous waterfall to visit as well...

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