

innerretreat

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# GOING WITH THE FLOW

If you'd told me I was a control freak a couple of months ago, I'd have probably laughed at you – and privately felt slightly insulted. Now? I'd shrug my shoulders and agree. You could throw another couple of descriptive adjectives at me too, and I wouldn't drop a single one – you're not allowed to when you're a perfectionist. But you'd better be quick, because impatience is another of my claims to fame. So I'm an impatient, controlling perfectionist. Aren't you glad you don't know me? The irony is that you probably do, and you probably wouldn't describe me that way at all.

How many spontaneous, fun-loving, friendly people out there hide an inner Miss Houghton? Miss Houghton (my mother's spinster headmistress and my nickname as a bossy four-year old) is the one who perches on a straight-backed chair inside your head with a two-metre ruler across her bony lap, ready to beat you up mercilessly after you scoff that second helping of dessert you really weren't planning on having. She has absolutely no qualms about spoiling a good night out either, just because your jeans are a little too tight. She even gets to choose your fat days. She's a right bitch to be honest, and there are many of us out there, myself included, who've let her rule the roost for much too long, perhaps

without even realising it. You see, being an impatient, controlling perfectionist is a fabulous combination in many ways – I get things done, I'm efficient and organised, and I often get my own way by very subtle means. But when Miss Houghton gets her hands on these characteristics, they can be more like weapons than tools. And I'm not talking about an eating disorder – I'm a passionate foodie and have a very healthy appetite. I'm talking about the stress caused by unreasonably high expectations in terms of weight, health and fitness.

The truth is I have an ideal lifestyle which I've strived to achieve for years. Yoga every day. A nice long run several times a week. A vegetarian diet supplemented with lots of oily

fish and organic nuts. Not too much caffeine or too many refined carbohydrates, but a nice chunk of dark chocolate and a few glasses of quality wine when I fancy. The perfect diet, right? Cosmo would be so proud. Amazingly, I get it right 80 percent of the time, which is more than enough when I'm happy with what's in the mirror and on the scale. But let a few extra kilograms creep on and 80 percent just isn't good enough anymore. It's certainly not enough for a perfectionist like Miss Houghton anyway. With the personality of bread mould and the *joie de vivre* of a salt cellar, she has the ability to drain joy out of any situation just because of a little flab, even when I should be on top of the world. What a spoil sport.



# ASIA SPA

Situated next to the large, lofty-ceilinged yoga studio, I found that the Love Kitchen unfortunately does not share the same views as the pool and suites. But the focus is on the food and the homey space with indoor and outdoor seating serves up hearty vegetarian cuisine including the excellent Choeng Mon Burrito with cashew 'cheese' and the delicious Cashew Nut Stir Fry. A few healthy non-veg dishes such as the delicious Prawn Summer Rolls with satay sauce are also offered. From completely raw meals to decadent dark chocolate cake, the menu is incredibly varied, but what each dish has in common is its freshness, taste and health value. For breakfast I opted for the crunchy muesli with dairy-free coconut 'yoghurt' and fresh fruit. An hour of reading by the pool later – embarking on my first of five books for the week – it was time for yoga.

## OHMMM MY

Absolute Sanctuary is no boot camp – you can choose exactly how much yoga you want to do and when you want to do it – if at all. Four yoga classes are offered a day and different classes suit different levels of experience, whether you're a practiced yogi or don't know your downward dog from your crow pose. Long, slow stretching makes 60-minute Yin classes popular with beginners, while the 60-minute Detox Yoga is another gentle class focusing on ridding the body of toxins and promoting blood flow. 60- and 90-minute Flow classes speed

things up a little with more complicated vinyasas or sequences of poses, yet they are still suitable for beginners. 90-minute Hot Flow and Hot Classes challenge more intermediate students and will give even a seasoned yogi a serious work out – exactly what you're looking for if you're used to regular practice at home.

I found myself doing two yoga classes a day, reveling in the challenge, the peace and the flow of the classes. Your mind can't wander when practicing yoga – you're in the moment and therefore free of thoughts of the past or future. I even found myself liking what I saw in the mirrors when I caught a glimpse of myself every now and then, despite eating like a horse and not losing a pound. After a few days at the resort, I explored further afield, hiring an automatic scooter for 300 baht a day and tooting off to Fisherman's Village, to Ocean's 11 on Bophut Beach for a fine seafood dinner and to The Karma Samui to sip on a fresh coconut on the gorgeous Padma Deck overhanging the sea. I could have also ferried across to the picture-postcard beaches of Koh Pha Ngang or gone scuba-diving on Koh Tao's pristine reefs but I didn't feel the need to tick those boxes.

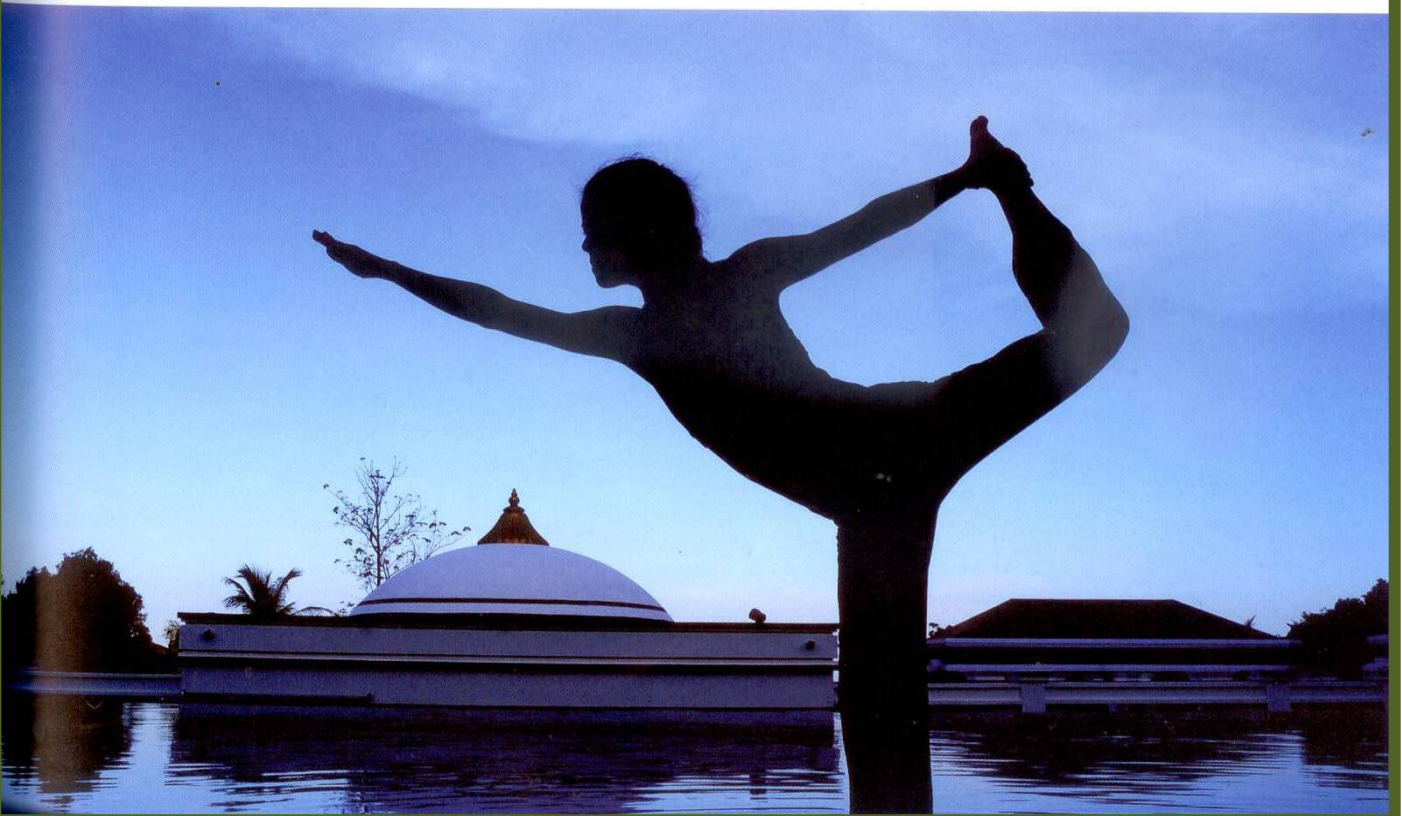
So what did my week achieve? Certainly not a 100% sight-seeing hit rate. But more importantly, what did it prove? I came away feeling great, and yes, that was probably aided by being booze-free, heartily vegetarian and well-limbered up

thanks to yoga. But perhaps it was more the fact that for a whole week, I'd been free of guilt. Considering I'd tucked into a good few slices of dark chocolate cake and had worked pretty late via wireless internet a few nights, it wasn't as if I'd had a "perfect" lifestyle week, but what I had had, was a week free of self-imposed stress. With the option to live my 100% ideal lifestyle, I hadn't. I'd chosen the 95% route, willfully giving Miss Houghton the finger.

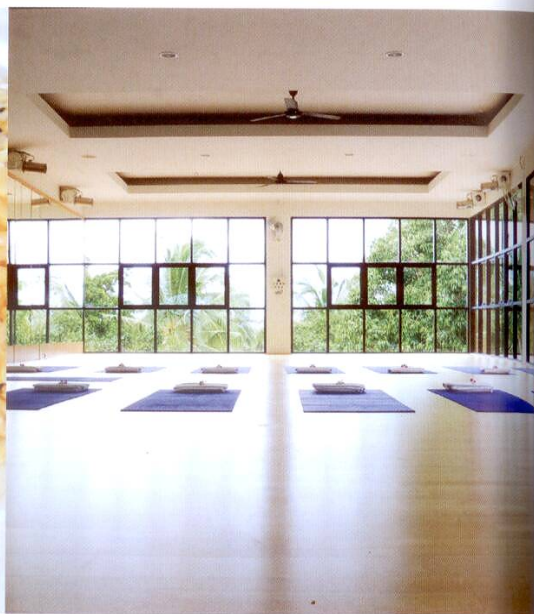
What I really gained was insight into myself. When things I can't control get wobbly, I try to fix things by controlling what I can control: the food I eat, the exercise I do and the way I look – and I want things fixed quickly dammit. The thought process goes that if I get my lifestyle perfect, then I'll have more control over everything else. I'm pretty sure there are others like me, and what we don't realise is that the stress of trying to achieve this supposed 100% solution just makes things worse. It's infinitely better to take a few deep breaths and just go with the flow. It may be a bumpy ride but there's much less chance of injury when you loosen up, right?

And what of Miss Houghton? She's still busy trying to find her ruler somewhere on Koh Samui. What she doesn't realise is that it's been broken exactly in half and disposed of in Hong Kong by an impatient, controlling perfectionist, whose decided that 80% is perfect enough.

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## innerretreat



Cue 2009 and a rotten few months. With a lot going on including too much work and travel (the type from which you come back stressed, having to deal with the blues *and* a diet), I hit March emotionally and physically drained, with a plague of stress-related skin issues to add insult to injury.

It was time to find out whether a 100% “perfect” lifestyle would really make things better. I needed proof. Proof that I could do it if I wanted to, and proof that it was worth the effort. Could I really not drink a glass of wine for seven days and manage to do yoga every day instead of just twice a week? Could I be a true vegetarian, instead of just a “meat avoider”, and how would this affect my body and make me feel? I didn’t want to detox. I wanted to live the life I aspire to live, every day, for a solid week, to see if it’s really what I wanted, and at the end of the day, if my body agreed.

But where would I do this? I needed a break. Not one that revolved around overeating and lazing about, resulting in me feeling worse on my return than when I’d left. A bit of research and I found a possible alternative. An alternative that promised a blissful break in beautiful surrounds, all the poolside chilling, beach action and pampering I desired, healthy vegetarian cuisine and as much yoga a day as I fancied. The result (or so the website promised) was that I’d get home feeling truly refreshed and looking fab. Would a week’s yoga retreat at Absolute Sanctuary on the idyllic island of Koh Samui really revive me to the extent I desired and

needed? Would a week of living my optimal lifestyle really have the benefits I believed they would? And can a holiday really be the stress-free, balmy escape we always dream it will be? I was about to find out.

### JUST BREATHE

I live in a city I love. Hong Kong’s juxtaposition of wilderness and skyscrapers means you can be running a mountain trail within minutes of leaving work, and sitting at one of Soho’s trendiest restaurants just an hour later. Convenient doesn’t even begin to describe it. Step off a plane in Koh Samui however, after a short, three-hour direct flight, and Hong Kong’s biggest downfall is immediately obvious – its air quality. Thailand’s third largest island, Samui is a green paradise of natural resources, with sandy beaches, coral reefs, jungle-covered hills and clean air. Warm, fragrant and laden with oxygen, it’s a palpable entity encouraging you to breathe deeply as soon as you step foot on the island – especially at night when your tropical surroundings aren’t visible to distract. You don’t have much farther to go to get to Absolute Sanctuary. From the airport the resort is just a 10-minute complimentary transfer away, yet it’s situated on a forested hillside completely surrounded by nature, just a five-minute scooter-cruise from the laid back Choeng Mon Beach, and 15-minutes from the central hub of Chaweng Beach.

Still floating on a fresh-air high, I was accompanied by the chirrup of crickets and

a charming concierge to my room, walking up through the resort’s lush gardens under a star-filled sky. One of 38 spacious rooms and suites housed in five individual Moroccan-inspired buildings, my room’s interior continued the Moroccan theme with vibrant yet soothing colours and a roomy mosaic-tiled bathroom. Free wireless internet, aircon, high-quality linen and a flat-screen TV added to the comfort quotient. I slept like a log and woke to a sun-bright dawn and views from my balcony extending over coconut groves to the turquoise waters of the Gulf of Thailand. A good start I felt.

### WARMING UP

Feeling ravenous, I decided to explore in the direction of the Love Kitchen, Absolute Sanctuary’s restaurant which opens at 6am. Passing the sparkling rim-flow, salt-water pool at the resort’s heart, I noticed the Juice Bar which I later found serves delicious fresh fruit and vegetable juices, as well as light snacks. I also passed the Spa which is housed in the same airy structure as the Detox Centre. As I was to discover with my daily massages, the Spa is a welcoming haven of cool offering four indoor treatment rooms, an open-air massage sala with six massage beds, a vast range of body treatments and a number of facials using Jurlique products. The Detox Centre features nine private treatment rooms with colon hydrotherapy beds, and those on a Detox retreat, rather than a Yoga retreat, are cared for by Dr. Alister Bredee, and a staff of professional and personable nurses.