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Top 10 eco

Ever wondered where the best, healthiest, most tranquil spots are in south-east Asia? Wonder no longer, as Frank Arrigazzi and Christina Soeberg share their top 10 resorts in Bali and Thailand

In July 2012 I had the opportunity to go to Costa Rica and teach yoga at the Farm of Life, a unique health retreat close to San Isidro.

Everything was unfolding like a perfect, unplanned story, and after a few days in Costa Rica I met a wonderful soul, Christina. We connected instantly and suddenly we were spending hours having inspirational conversations, reading books or simply staring towards the lush Costa Rican jungle. We felt the call to meet again in another exotic country, such as Bali or Thailand and explore our common passions for yoga, nature, healthy cuisine and ancient healing arts.

Christina has long been experimenting with different holistic approaches and dietary concepts with the strong belief that one day she would recover from her continuous health challenges. From stomach problems to adrenal fatigue and Lyme disease, her journey has been tremendously transformational: from not being able to walk, to now travelling the world. She has discovered that in order to thrive she must choose the healthiest foods, live a stress-free life, connect with nature more often and above all live her life doing the things she has always loved.

Her approach to this new lifestyle combined with my years of yoga and nutrition studies, and passion for ancient healing arts is a great match, and together we decided we would travel around south-east Asia to find the most outstanding eco health resorts, and learn their unique approaches to attain lasting health and vitality.

Top healing destinations

When we started our trip we were looking for places with a strong approach to the true essence of what well-being means, and not just a vacation resort for relaxation. It was important for us to find places imbued with the vision of healthy cuisine, yoga and other ancient practices. Unique and tranquil spaces where we could feel safe to trust and let go of anything we no longer needed.

This journey has taken us from Ubud to Koh Kood, from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, and far away from the urban sounds of crowded cities and car engines to explore some of the top healing destinations. We have visited award-winning eco health resorts such as Fivelements, Soneva Kiri and Desa Seni, which have brought to life the authentic richness of the healing arts performed for thousands of years and passed down generations, from mothers and grandmothers.



health resorts

1 **Fivelements, Bali**

Located in the south-west of Ubud, Bali and a one-hour drive from Denpasar airport, Fivelements is a place for total transformation, as evidenced by the numerous prestigious awards and accolades it's received.

We were warmly greeted at the airport by Fivelements staff. The Fivelements experience is something you will not easily forget. Every guest is given a personal induction on arrival, having completed a lifestyle questionnaire in advance.

Here you will leave all your worries and responsibilities behind and delve into the genuine love and gentle kindness from every therapist and healer. They use ancient wisdom and follow the Balinese principle of Sekala-Niskala, which holds that we all live equally in two worlds; the seen or conscious world (Sekala), and the unseen or psychic world (Niskala). The Balinese healers engage the help of the higher divine source during

each healing session and slowly allow the powerful energy to make you feel completely transformed and rejuvenated.

The restaurant, Sakti Dining Room, offers the most delicious raw food you could imagine. Chef Made from Bali has been cooking for the past 20 years and recently travelled to the US to learn at the best raw food schools in the country. His signature raw dishes are top culinary experiences that delight guests from all over the world. He often creates brand new dishes and impresses his guests with his spontaneous creations. His menu has a broad selection of delicious and nutritionally well-balanced dishes. We particularly loved the Rosella Kombucha, the Coconut Mushroom Soup and the unforgettable chocolate cake, a supreme delicacy – by far some of the most delicious raw foods we've ever tried.

The villas at Fivelements are connected with the sacred Ayung River. Its hypnotising sounds and rhythms softly enter the rooms from the open verandas which offer a direct view of

the river from the open-air bathtub. We had the pleasure of enjoying a 'flower bath', a warm bath covered with freshly picked rose petals of different colours, a marvellous experience.

Everything at Fivelements has been carefully considered and prepared. From the traditional architecture to the thatched roof, every area of the resort has been designed following specific sacred positions according to 'Vatsu' philosophy (Balinese cosmology). The super low-energy LED lightbulbs and the ultra-efficient sycamore leaf-shaped ceiling fans show that nothing has been left to chance. Lahra and Chicco Tatriele, the founding visionaries of this magical project, have created a kind of mirage that will make you feel pampered at a soul level.

One of our favourite healing sessions was Watsu, a water healing dance experience in warm water. Inspired by Shiatsu, it features acupressure and passive joint movement to free up muscles. The relaxation, safety, timelessness and peace lasted for some days after the treatment.

www.fivelements.org

2 Metropolitan By COMO Bangkok, Thailand

We could sense from the beginning that this was not another luxurious hotel in the hectic city, but a unique combination of luxury and an invitation to relax and delve into a well-being experience.

When we walked into the lobby we were greeted by an overwhelming Zen-like atmosphere which made us forget completely that we were in the heart of Bangkok. The Metropolitan is another work of art by Christina Ong, a visionary hotelier and the successful business woman behind the international brand By COMO. Her vision is to educate people to live a much healthier lifestyle, hence her passionate dedication to creating concepts such as COMO Shambhala Spa and the living food aspects at her restaurants. Not surprisingly she is a yoga advocate who practises with discipline every morning.

After our long flight, a massage at Shambhala helped to shake off our jet lag. We had a very soothing and regenerating massage performed by an experienced masseuse who used a selection of By COMO's own brand of natural products. The spa concepts have been incorporated into all By COMO hotels and the spa facilities are stunning and include a selection of beauty and massage treatments, yoga classes, sauna and jacuzzi.

The decor of the hotel is hip and luxurious without being pretentious and Christina Ong's feminine touches can be felt throughout, from beautiful flowers and sculptures in the lobby to the natural body care in the bathrooms, Mac computers in the reception and even in the hotel staff uniform: stylish Comme des Garçons suits.

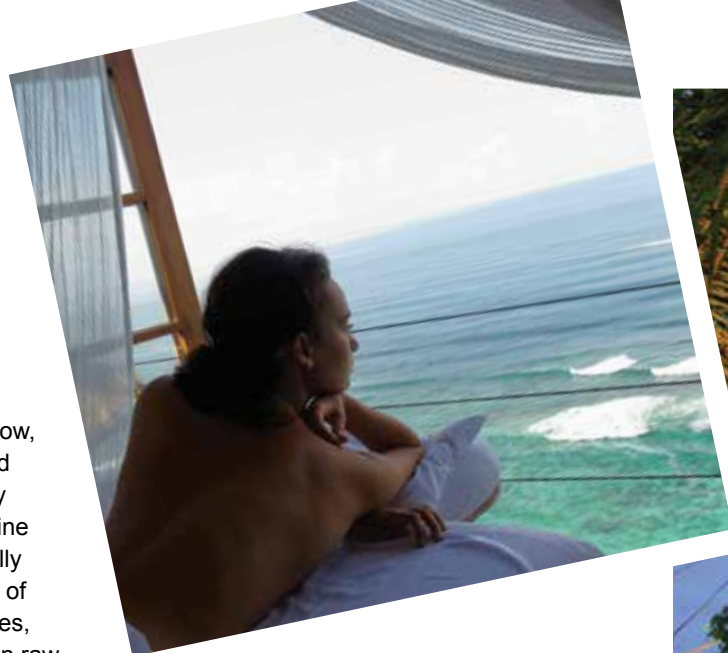
Jorge Monge, the general manager, made us feel at home by organising a welcome lunch for us at the hotel's Thai restaurant, Nahm, a sister restaurant to the Michelin Starred Nahm (in

London's Halkin Hotel By COMO) where we enjoyed a delicious lunch, prepared by chef David Thompson, that exploded with delicious authentic Thai flavours.

We were really excited to find out about the exclusive healthy cuisine served at Glow, the restaurant on the second floor of the hotel, inspired by the COMO Shambhala cuisine concepts. It offers nutritionally healthy dishes with a palate of satiating flavours and textures, all with a strong emphasis on raw food combinations. The breakfast menu is one of the best we've ever experienced, and one of our favourite dishes from the menu was the Raw Young Coconut and Almond Porridge.

Details like the exotic fruit platter, wooden hangers, Thai silk pillows and marble bench bathroom evoked a natural feeling and comfort that allowed us to feel at home in no time. A spacious bath tub, soft bath robes and efficient room service completed a perfect stay in Bangkok. We can't wait to visit Metropolitan By COMO again.

www.comohotels.com



3 Karma Kandara, Bali

Located in Ungasan, the southernmost tip of Bali and a mere 25-minute drive from Denpasar airport, Karma Kandara sits on the edge of a cliff, offering breathtaking views of the ocean.

We were warmly greeted by Judy Chapman, the spa curator manager of the resort, who had lined up a programme filled with adventures, wellness spa treatments, healing therapies and yoga.

This outstanding resort comprises 46 villas, ranging from one to five bedrooms, all with private pools. The villas are connected by tranquil lush tropical gardens, paths, bridges and ponds, and a thriving fauna with regular visits from monkeys. The fun energy of Karma Kandara was not something we expected from a place of such luxurious standards, but we quickly became accustomed to the relaxed atmosphere and were ready to take on a great adventure.

First stop was the Karma restaurant, suspended on the very brink of a limestone cliff, 85 metres above the Indian Ocean, where we had the pleasure of enjoying a menu, which included an extensive selection





of the freshest organic produce and delicious healthy drinks.

The morning after our arrival we had a meeting on the beach for 'yoga in the ocean', also known as SUP, Stand Up Paddleboard yoga. The class consisted of yoga stretches, meditation, paddling and a serious core-body work out, all on a surfboard! A very fun and challenging experience that left us relaxed for many hours after the class.

The Karma Spas' philosophy is 'pleasure is part of the cure', something we could feel strongly as we received different ecstatic treatments from healers and therapists that always left us longing for more, from cranio-sacral healing therapy with Elisa Senese to our jacuzzi session enjoying the sunset and our yoga with Leilani.

From the beginning of our stay at Karma we found that from the little raw chocolate treats to the low-impact architecture and design integrating with the natural environment, to the spa treatments, the whole experience left us with a strong feeling that this is the kind of place we dream of creating one day. It will always be one of our top favourite spots in Bali.

www.karmakandara.com

4 **Desa Seni, Bali**

The best way to describe Desa Seni is simply: beauty and happiness. Desa Seni is an eco-friendly village located in Canggu, just 25 minutes from Denpasar airport; it's a magical resort surrounded by rice fields and close to beautiful beaches.

When we arrived at the resort we felt as if we were in an 'Art Village', which is what Desa Seni means. From every individual wooden guest house to the architecture and the garden's design, it shows the work of a creative visionary. Behind it all is owner, Tom Talucci; he's responsible for the design and décor, from the antique-style Indonesian cabins, peaked roofs and stone walkways to the curtains and furniture. Every guest house has been named and the decoration carefully selected to complete the Art Village vibe.

At Desa Seni, the yoga studio is very popular and guests, outsiders and staff can enjoy a range of classes daily, from yoga programmes, pranayama practices, Vedic meditation to Balinese dance for children. Our favourite class was

the 'Nia Dance', which is an incredible combination of yoga, dance, martial arts and the Alexander Technique, which helps to release tension, harmonise the brain and balance mind, body and spirit.

The restaurant, which follows the 'slow food' concept, serves the most delicious vegetarian meals, 80% of which are homegrown from its garden. The atmosphere is enchanting; the lush, green colours that surround the guest houses put us in mind of how the garden of Eden might have looked. The air feels oxygen-rich and full of life-force, thanks to the abundant greenery and homegrown organic produce that encircle the villas.

In an effort to keep Bali clean and preserve the country's natural resources, Desa Seni is working with the community, supporting the locals, recycle points and garbage reduction programmes. Everyone is highly conscious of preserving resources, and there is a sense of nature's gratitude for not being interrupted but, rather, well taken care of.

www.desaseni.com

5 Tao Garden, Thailand

Set in the heart of lush gardens, peaceful water canals, banana groves, papaya trees and rice fields, Tao Garden is a holistic healing centre located 15 kilometres outside Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Tao Garden was founded more than 15 years ago by world-renowned Qi Gong and Taoist Master, Mantak Chia. He used his experience of Thai, Chinese and Indian medicine along with Western holistic medicines and a variety of other treatments and healing practices to create this healing, award-winning oasis. This garden is surrounded by 32 acres of lush vegetation that looks like an enchanted forest and offers the perfect environment to relax, rejuvenate and find your inner peace.

One thing you notice as soon as you arrive at Tao Garden is the special energy in the gardens, which were designed following ancient Feng Shui concepts. Beautiful sculptures, little massage huts, statues and giant porcelain vases from China (to capture the 'chi') along with 215 bonsai trees are found carefully situated throughout the gardens.



After wandering around, I discovered that it has an array of facilities to suit any guest needs – a gym, a basketball court, tennis courts and a salt-water swimming pool, but also an 'immortal meditation hall' as well as a centre for 'universal Tao'. At the centre, the clinic combines ancient Eastern health philosophies and Western medicine, and the approach is simple: "cleanest blood, cleanest cells, good Chi, and good health as a result".

Taoism, Ayurveda, Acupuncture, traditional Thai massages, body organ cleansing massages, detox and weight-loss programmes are just a few modalities that can be experienced at Tao Garden's Pakua Clinic and at the Anyamanee Spa.

The treatments are amazing and we had the opportunity to try a variety of them, from the herbal steam bath, blood tests and colonics, to the ozone sauna and the centre's signature massages, 'Chi Nei Tsang' and 'Karsai Nei Tsang', which even though slightly painful, were the most powerful massages either of us have ever experienced. They consist of massaging specific points in the abdominal and pelvic areas with the intention of releasing blockages, physical toxins and negative emotional sediments in the internal organs, and activating the chi and flow of energy in the organs. The food, "structured around blood type", is served in the outdoor dining hall – meals are served three times a day, fresh and delicious with subtle Thai influences suitable for Western tastes. A sign next to each dish lists its healing qualities.

Whether you come to Tao Garden to learn Qi Gong from Master Mantak Chia, to experience one of its unique courses on ancient healing practices, or to treat yourself to one of the numerous beneficial treatments, the Tao experience will make you feel completely rejuvenated and alive.

www.tao-garden.com



6 Soneva Kiri, Koh Kood, Thailand

Soneva Kiri is nestled on the Thai island of Koh Kood, in a lush tropical rainforest on the south-east coast of the Gulf of Siam.

Our exotic eco-escapade began at Bangkok International airport, where we were escorted via private plane across the city skyline and turquoise sea to the isolated resort; one of the few corners of Thailand that makes you feel completely aligned with nature's soft sounds and beauty. Our expectations were high!

Soon after landing on Soneva's unspoiled property with 27 huge villas across the abundant ground, we were greeted by our personal butler, who had scheduled a really exciting plan for us for the next couple of days. We were excited to learn more about its 'SLOW LIFE (Sustainable-Local-Organic-Wellness Learning-Inspiring-Fun-Experiences) Philosophy', which aims to create a fun and luxurious vacation to rejuvenate each guest and satisfy every longing for adventure while being gentle and respectful to nature. On our first night at Soneva we enjoyed a romantic dinner at the restaurant, Benz, located on the other side of the island. We were taken by speedboat over the most peaceful waters we've ever seen from the resort to the



open air restaurant lounge. Taking into consideration our healthy food requirements, the chef had prepared us a delicious and satiating Thai feast.

The number of activities offered at Soneva Kiri is exceptional, and includes 'Tree-Pod Dining', an outdoor cinema experience, a chocolate and ice-cream room with free goodies all day, snorkelling, and the wildest and most relaxing beautiful adventures you can imagine, on this completely unspoiled island of lush vegetation and hardly any roads.

The spa experience at Soneva Kiri was also extraordinary, and from the moment we entered the room we felt as if we'd been wrapped in a soft blanket of aromatic scents and healing energies. In line with the SLOW LIFE philosophy, the Six Senses Spa concept at Soneva Kiri has a strong Ayurvedic approach and offers a luxurious selection of healing therapies with highly experienced therapists, and with the use of only the purest and mostly locally sourced ingredients.

Soneva Kiri created the concept: 'No news, no shoes'. This encourages guests to go deep within and find peace in the moment, while having the opportunity to once again connect with nature. Soneva is also a pioneer for taking responsibility for the environment and has developed

different sustainable approaches to support local communities. From using sustainable materials, recycling waste and developing ways of preserving the fragile underwater coral reef ecosystem, it is highly conscious of making its 'eco' vision shine through its initiatives.

We could easily have stayed for a couple of weeks to fully explore all of Soneva's facilities, and now we can't wait for Soneva Fushi in the Maldives to become our next adventurous destination! Thanks Soneva for creating such a magical place.

www.soneva.com

7 Oazia Spa Villas, Bali

Nestled in Seminyak, located 45 minutes from the airport, is Oazia Spa Villas. A brand creation from the Russian owner Veronika Blomgren, Oazia Spa Villas, along with the Talika Oazia Cruise line and Spa Vodka Lobster bar, combine modern Russian interior design with elements of the Balinese traditions and culture.

After being welcomed warmly by the staff, we crossed the hallway that led to our Aqua Villa. A pathway of stepping stones across a pond filled with fish and water lilies leads the way to the lush, green garden and the two open-plan living rooms in a contemporary stylish white-wooden interior. We

were greeted at our private villa with exotic fruits and an overwhelming first impression of this new oasis soon led to a spontaneous naked jump into the big pool. The attentive staff later prepared a lovely vegetarian dinner for us in our own private sanctuary. It was the most romantic experience, as we ate while embraced by soft sounds from nature's surroundings. The evening was perfectly wrapped up with a warm bath in the outdoor bathtub under the stars – a real treat for the soul.

The spa's philosophy aims for balance in all areas of life and the main vision is to create a space for healing, rejuvenation and inner growth. A broad selection of healing therapies like Watsu and other holistic spa treatments is on offer. We experienced magic at Oazia and during enchanted evenings, felt like fairytale characters in a secret palace before waking up from a spell.

www.oaziaspavillas.com



8 The Spa Resorts Chiang Mai, Thailand

Our next adventure took us to The Spa Resorts Chiang Mai, another beautiful destination in the province of Chiang Mai. On arrival we were truly impressed by the lush greenery, water canals and the soothing and peaceful vibe. The general manager, Mali, was waiting for us with a programme full of spa treatments for the next four days. The resort has another three sister locations in Thailand: The Spa Samui Beach Resort (beachfront), with beautiful views overlooking the Gulf of Thailand on Lamai Beach where The Spa Resorts originated nearly 20 years ago; the Spa Samui Mountain Retreat, set on picturesque Samui Rock formations; and The Spa Koh Chang Resort, set on the second largest island in Thailand, sitting next to a peaceful national park.

At The Resort Spa Chiang Mai there are 65 rooms and villas spread over 80,000sq/m. Several detox and weight-loss programmes

are available, as well as retreats, along with raw foods and yoga. The resort also has its own organic farm where it grows most of the fruits and vegetables used. The vision of the resort is to provide insights and tools for optimal health, and to encourage guests to feel better and healthier by using a simple system of healthy habits. A range of spa treatments is on offer, varying from traditional Thai massages to body scrubs, oil massages, Ayurvedic treatments and reflexology. The Bamboo Spa at the resort is open all day; it has a tranquil setting in an open-air-style bamboo house, where authentic traditional healing treatments are given. We were delighted to try a few of the massages and the herbal steam room. Other amenities of the resort include far-infrared saunas, detox consultations and daily yoga classes at Cloud 9 with a 100-mile view of vegetation.

www.thesparesorts.net/chiangmai

9 Absolute Sanctuary, Thailand

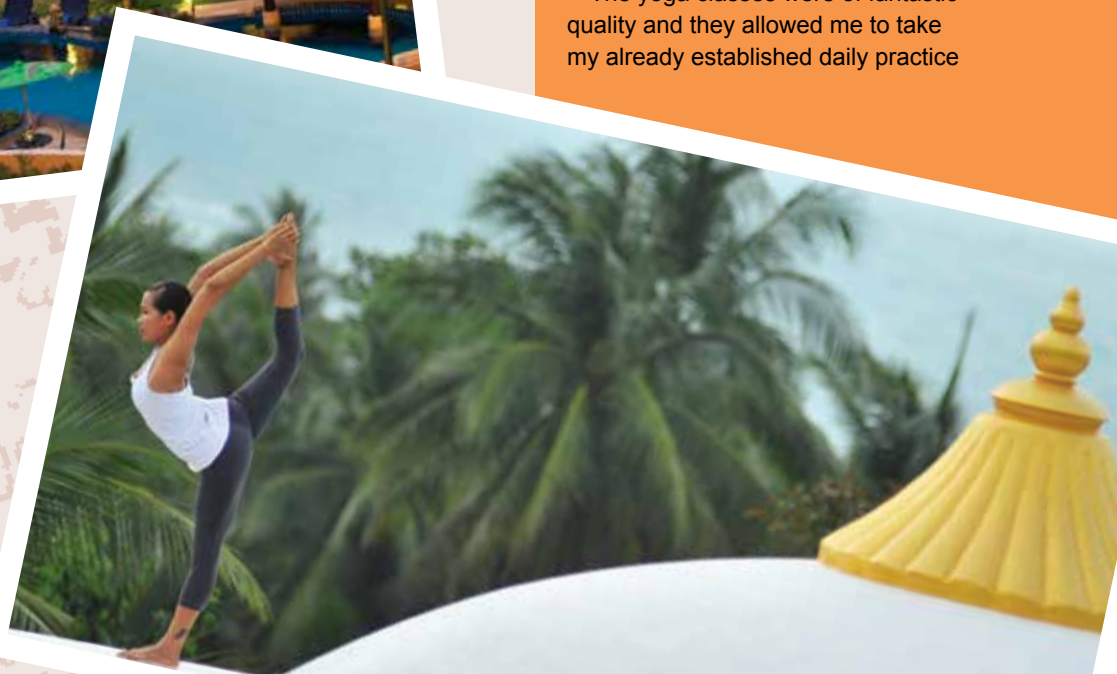
We were really excited to travel to Koh Samui and visit one of the most popular yoga and detox spots in Thailand, Absolute Sanctuary. Perched on a hilltop with stunning views, this is a unique place for a completely rejuvenating, well-being experience.

When we arrived at this beautiful Moroccan-inspired resort, we were escorted by the friendly staff to one of the 38 luxurious rooms. Each room has a vibrant colour theme with modern decor; our room even had a beautiful ocean view.

Opened in April 2008, the resort has increased its popularity as a yoga and detox destination, having already received numerous awards for its spa facilities, its unique yoga programmes and the deliciously healthy food served at the Love Kitchen. The Love Kitchen restaurant offers a broad selection of vegetarian, vegan and raw food choices; we were happy to find that it even has its own cook book.

From yoga breaks, detox packages and yoga teacher training to fasting programmes, Absolute Sanctuary offers a broad variety of classes with top notch professional teachers. I absolutely loved my week's yoga programme that consisted of a variety of spa treatments, vegetarian foods and daily yoga classes with world-renowned teachers.

The yoga classes were of fantastic quality and they allowed me to take my already established daily practice





10 The Ubud Village, Bali

The deep feeling of inspiration we had after visiting The Ubud Village defies description. This majestic resort is surrounded by beautiful rice fields and natural, peaceful surroundings. The atmosphere is an invitation for relaxation and invigoration of the spirit.

As soon as we arrived we were warmly greeted with a healthy juice and huge genuine smiles. We were shown around the entire resort with great enthusiasm, while our guides explained the setting to us.

We were fascinated to learn about the unique sustainable concepts that keep up to 65% of the space filled with original large trees and rare plants. The buildings are designed using traditional architecture with local, natural materials like paras stone for walls, alang-alang grass for roof thatching, and tanah taro water-based paint for wall-finishing.

Five minutes from the core centre of Ubud, the Village is an oasis away from the busy town with a genuine Balinese environment. The large villas offer a luxurious standard with soft, relaxing themes, everything a guest may need and an amazing open marble bath tub.

The food included a selection of fresh juices, smoothies and delicious soups as well as traditional Balinese cuisine, with many locally sourced ingredients. The staff made an exceptional effort to suit our needs and they prepared the healthiest dishes for us. From every staff member, especially those at the restaurant, to the massages at the spa, we had a truly relaxing stay and we will definitely be returning.

www.theubudvillage.com



Christina Soeberg is an international journalist who writes about environmental and health topics. After being ill and feeling rejected by conventional

medicine, she became interested in natural health and learnt about living foods.

Frank Arrigazzi studied nutrition from a very young age and is a passionate researcher within the fields of well-being, spirituality and yoga. He teaches yoga, founded the Purple Balance food range and has written *Tip Top Spiritual Lessons*. www.purplebalancesuperfoods.com

to a whole new level. Christina also enjoyed a seven-day detox programme, which included daily colonics, fresh detox juices and a selection of holistic spa treatments carried out by very skilled and dedicated staff at the spa.

Absolute Sanctuary's vision is to inspire people to renew their life-force and also gain more knowledge of how to sustain a healthier way of living, and return home with a suitcase full of inspiring new healthy routines. Thank you Absolute Sanctuary for a wonderfully rejuvenating stay. www.absolutesanctuary.com