

# RIPPLE *effect*

Poolside mocktails, massage and an A-list setting turn a Pilates bootcamp into a luxe escape with bonus ripples.

Words: Rebecca Long



Within moments of climbing out of the air-conditioned four-wheel drive that's whisked me from Koh Samui airport up a steep jungle-flanked driveway to a compound that looks like a paparazzi shot from an A-list honeymoon, I'm leaning off the bench in the open air lobby pointing to my butt. "I don't really want to touch this," I say, apologising for decimating the

precisely curated schedule for my three-day stay. Truth is, I couldn't give a flying lychee about my derriere or thighs. It mightn't be politically correct (Pilates purists cringe at the populist reduction of their craft to six-packism), but the reason I've signed up for Absolute Sanctuary's reformer Pilates bootcamp and not, say, the equally renowned yoga retreat or food-free detox is my abs (sorry, core). Hey, if the reformer's good enough for Alessandra Ambrosio – and Google swears it is – it's good enough for moi. Which is why, after some negotiation





## NEED TO KNOW

Absolute Sanctuary's Pilates bootcamps run for five or seven days starting at \$3,925 per single or \$3,495 per person twin share. Four airlines make multiple daily trips between Bangkok and Koh Samui with fares starting at about \$170. For further information visit [absolutesanctuary.com](http://absolutesanctuary.com)



and a cursory anatomy refresher on the merits of peripheral moves for core strength and the old abdominus cluster, we're replacing the butt and thighs sessions in my bulging timetable for abs and arms and adding an extra session of Absolute's exclusive Core Blast program – think TRX meets Cirque du Soleil. It will slot between the massage appointments geared to rapid recovery to optimise my program and ensure I feel as though I'm suitably R, R 'n' Rd (reformer Pilates, rest and relaxation). So far, so a million miles from the militaristic line-up I feared from the 'b' word, which promises to get guests long, lean and toned in the environs of a Moroccan-inspired resort overlooking the palm-fringed gulf of Thailand. I can even watch the sun set over the ocean from the yoga mat beside my cloudlike bed. Sigh.

Despite having landed in paradise, I'm not going to pretend I was sold on the whole fitness vacation thing. I've always taken offshore fitness camps with the same grain of iodised salt as spree-based franchises such as *The Biggest Loser*. In my mind, anyone can turn up to gym twice a day when their only other commitments are a morning yoga class and sipping from a coconut; the key to lasting fitness is consistency, not a BPM bender. It quickly becomes clear that despite its promise of rapid transformation, this is no standard drop-you-like-a-sack-of-spuds fay-cay. After seven years, Absolute Sanctuary has its schtick down to a fine art. First up, my wellness intake consultation with an Australian naturopath, whose attention to the detail in my intake form – 'bloating after eating, stress,

skin issues' – is frighteningly acute. It's augmented by a bioimpedance analysis reading to gauge body composition and hydration. Since we are (or I am) talking flat abs, I decide to face the fact that I look like an anaconda that's swallowed a whole goat after even a few mouthfuls of porridge or coffee with milk. Don't even mention protein bars and sugar alcohols; so long, seven-year denial. Within seconds, I'm agreeing to six months off gluten and the myriad foods that mimic it and promising to make batches of bone broth to help heal a suspected leaky gut. Artificial sweetener and lactose also have to go, says my counsel, who lists delicious-sounding

gut-friendly dishes at the resort's eatery, The Love Kitchen, where three daily spa cuisine meals and tropical juices and smoothies are included in my package.

Next up, I'm getting a TomTom-style reading of my vertebral positioning during a pre-program postural analysis with Absolute's Pilates expert – an internationally credentialled fitness trainer with encyclopaedic knowledge of musculoskeletal anatomy. Any fitness program that ignores alignment idiosyncrasies undermines its potential, I'm told, as I note a skewiff bone in the small of my back. Who knew? Not only will my personal biomechanics be factored into the personalised







abs and arms classes, but I'll leave with a schedule of moves to keep my body's quirks from becoming problems in later years. If I seem distracted, it's only because I'm eyeing a prime sun lounge by the adjacent pool, which anchors the compound's hilltop configuration and serves as both a quiet reading room and communal gathering spot, depending on what you're into and how long you're staying (Pilates bootcamps run for five or seven days while many detoxers and fitness program takers stay for 10 or more). The thought of ordering a juice mocktail from the open-air bar and plunging in spurs me on for my first reformer class – a mandatory intro session for newbies. While I recently tried and fell in love with reformer Pilates in Melbourne, I wouldn't know my blue spring from my foot bar. Despite their mechanical simplicity, these bedlike contraptions are surprisingly sophisticated, with all manner of resistance, angle and length settings to match a user's target zone and desired effect. The combinations are almost infinite and with just six people in a class, we each get a full personal intro to adjustments to suit our height, posture and goals. By the end of the hour intro, I'm equally excited and scared by how much the next few days with their two

group reformer classes are going to burn – and that's before I add the private reformer session and pick from the a la carte menu of yoga and fitness classes also included in my program. Fortunately I can have my freakout lying down, during the first of three massages included in the five-day package I'm squeezing into three. Fear quickly morphs into a more circumspect attitude: carpe core (and don't spare the cute cropped tee).

Once I'm suitably chilled about, well, the world, it's time to put bootcamp to the ultimate test. Abs are, after all, made in the kitchen, as are deflated gastrointestinal tracts. I'm not sure what I expected, but the Love Kitchen's a la carte menu is refreshingly democratic. Sure there's an emphasis on vego fare and an inventory of haute rabbit food for non-fasting detoxers on the less hardcore modified diet program, but they've also translated plenty of things you'd expect at a regular resort for the wellness set using raw and organic ingredients, superfoods and dairy alternatives – think hotcakes topped with banana, papaya, coconut yoghurt, palm syrup and raisins or a raw coconut yoghurt and fruit bowl for brekkie and fresh local fish steamed in banana leaves with lemongrass and lime leaf served

with a Thai sauce of mashed garlic, chilli, coriander, lime and shallot. While each guest has a brief from their intake assessment – a little voice in my head says, 'no toasted homemade bread or zucchini pancakes for you' – the rest is unbootcamp-esque carte blanche. I do feel slightly guilty eating a piece of date and coconut jungle brownie in front of the British mother and daughter detoxers who shared my ride from the airport, but they insist that they're amply satisfied by their nutrient-dense smoothies. More power to them. I, meanwhile, am like a kid in a gluten- and dairy-free candy store, marvelling at the number of dishes that can be made sans gluten and moo juice and making a mental note to buy the Love Kitchen's cookbook.

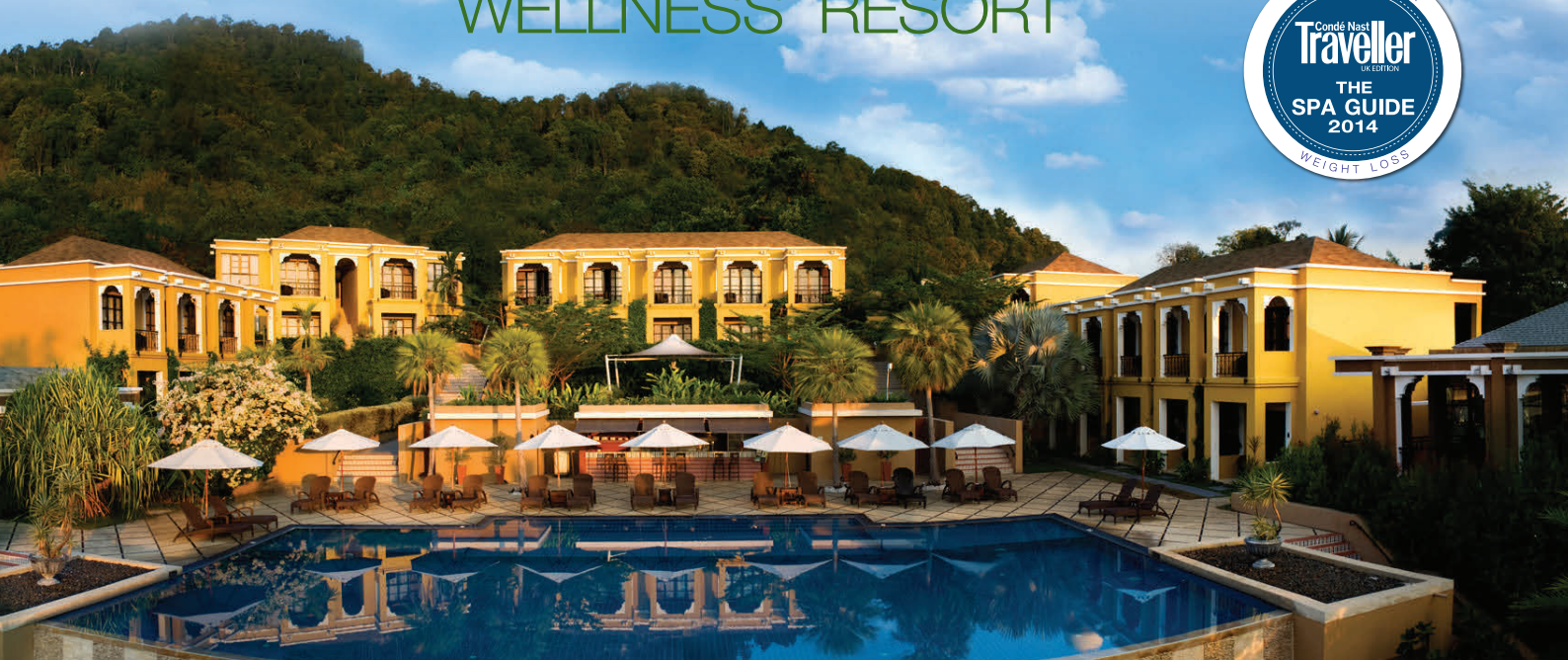
The culinary epiphany kickstarts a mental revolution, sending my long-held reservation about blitz-style overhauls on a giant U-turn. It's not as if I don't know half this stuff (yes, I am a health editor, a-hem), yet when it comes to recognising the personal relevance of information – less making time to learn to

apply it, prepare to apply it and actually apply it in the face of stubborn habits and unforgiving schedules – it's a different kettle of fish. If I force myself to think it through, the changes I'm establishing in three days would quite likely take years and thousands of dollars in 'the real world', where the odds of finding a naturopath, personal trainer and Pilates pro who speak the same lingo are lower than Kanye's pants. The integrated approach is like a lifestyle plan to not only guide my gymming for the long haul, but also correct glitches that impact overall wellness and indeed abs (stress, diet soft drinks, sleepless nights). While the heady exertion load and clean eating schedule inevitably produce the kind of quick results you can stick on your Instagram – #bootcamphottie – the real grunt work starts on home turf, where the old core competes with ironing and watching *The Office* re-runs while knocking back reheated potato gratin in three mouthfuls. Call this transformation training.

After a gentle morning yoga class and swim to start day two,



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I'm back in the poolside Pilates studio and my abs are popping in a way they didn't yesterday. "See them? See what happens when you tuck your ribs?" our instructor cheers. That's another thing that makes core work so infuriatingly tedious – the slightest technique discrepancy and all that hard work you feel like you're doing counts for squat (planker and cruncher beware). I can't discredit the help of a gluten-, dairy- and caffeine-free brekkie in the flat tummy stakes either. In my chaser private class I learn how to tell when my core is disengaged and how to switch it back on – whether I'm doing bicycle crunches, Bosu ball or reformer work. I'm excited to see how quickly my prescribed daily planks make my abs more ripply, especially with a couple of reformer classes a week (Joseph

Pilates famously said that after 10 Pilates classes you'd feel the difference, after 20 you'd see the difference and after 30, you'd have a new body). On that reckoning, 10 days here and you'd be rocking an impressive rig, but Jo's math didn't account for what Absolute Sanctuary calls 'core suspend', which has got to bring the numbers down by at least two classes. Imagine trying to stabilise yourself while dangling mid-air with no firm centre of gravity; your core basically flicks on and off like the lights on a carnival ride as you change positions. Hot tip: book this one a couple of hours clear of food – and any activity demanding lifting anything heavier than a fork, for that matter. I let my muscles regroup while I shoot the breeze with a book on my private balcony before a restorative Thai stretch massage. I hadn't expected my controlling, independent streak to give in so easily, but I've settled into going with the flow and quite like the sense of carelessness, knowing everything's been organised for me. Every one of the guests from the resort's 38 rooms look blissfully chilled and there's

not a hint of the boredom I thought might plague a place perched in a remote island corner (although if you do get cabin fever, it doesn't cost much to take a cab to a nearby beach



town). For me, the intervals between workouts are a welcome chance to practise my new food manifesto, which involves chewing my food until it liquefies to stop wads of protein from putrefying in my gut, which can cause gas and the concomitant food baby phenomenon (TMI?) For a late lunch, I wisely choose the heavenly fragrant chicken in lettuce cups. Gluten free, check. Low carb, check. Protein for muscle repair, Roger that. If your healing ambitions are more Chopra than Victoria's Secret, you can also book appointments with a line-up of visiting wellness consultants practising everything from enneagram to emotional freedom technique (EFT) as well as chiropractic and shiatsu.

By the time I wake up to a spectacular sunrise over the gulf on day three, I'm ridiculously energetic despite having pushed my body harder than I have in years. My middle's as flat as a board and I note that since I arrived, I haven't experienced the uncomfortable gurgly feeling that's come to seem normal after eating. Apparently it's not. While occasional thoughts of Starbucks and my favourite protein bar set off some kind of dopamine alarm (damn reward circuitry), they're easily rerouted with a healthy substitute such as herbal tea or a bite of a banana from the fruit bowl in my room. I bound down to breakfast to sample another exotic cocktail of seeds and fruits before hitting the reformer, unafraid that my tummy will throw a tantrum. Sitting outside in the morning sun, I compare notes with fellow guests –

most of whom are female. The common theme is that everyone is somehow surprised by what they've been able to do here, whether giving up grog for five days, fasting or withstanding two or more workouts a day (that would be me). While it's not the real world, it provides empowering evidence for what's possible with the right support and know-how. Between arms and abs, a token butt and thighs session, my exit consultation and final massage, I compile a post-retreat action plan. One, a digital file of gluten- and dairy-free recipes that can be prepared in under 10 minutes and a separate file of snack options (going for the 'R' in SMART goals). Two, download the enrolment form for reformer Pilates five minutes from home (I did mention realistic, no?). Three, download a recipe for bone broth. Four, schedule a plank every morning before work, aiming for as much of a minute as I can handle. At my exit consult, I'm given a bevy of simple exercises that will strengthen my core, optimise my posture and generally make movement easier. The abdominal covetousness of two days earlier is buried in the innumerable benefits of eating and moving in a way that works for my body, but I'm assured that ripples will be a fringe benefit – as long as I remember to tuck my ribs, chew well, order soy milk and plank. To butcher a quote from the Dalai Lama, "With realisation of one's own potential and self-confidence in one's ability, one can build a better world (and core)." Look out for my crop top selfie, #courtesyofPilatesbootcamp. ■