



Health tourism

Chiang Mai style

When I think of “health tourism”, visions of nose jobs, Lasik surgery and breast implants come to mind. Bumrungrad International Hospital in Bangkok boasts more than half a million foreign “healthcare tourists” a year. All are in desperate pursuit of top notch and affordable medical treatment.

In Chiang Mai, Thailand’s ancient second city, the definition of “health” leans more towards “wellness”, and tourists come in droves to detoxify, learn about their bodies and heal their souls.

The other month I travelled to The Spa Resort in Mae Rim, just outside Chiang Mai. The Spa Resort is touted by many reviewers as one of the top 10 resorts of this type worldwide ... and the most affordable.

Top toxic city

Life in Pattaya and Bangkok had me filled to the brim with every toxin imaginable. In fact, if the top 10 most toxic cities were ranked, I’d bet Bangkok would appear somewhere near the top. Too much food ... too much alcohol ... too much everything had me feeling ... in a word ... “crappy”.

I booked on the internet and chose their signature detox getaway package aptly named the “you changed my life” package. This programme is aimed at ridding the body of years of toxic build up in the digestive, cardiovascular and renal systems. Included in the package is lodging, consultation, a seven-day fast, herbal supplements, therapeutic massage, daily juices, daily colonics, meditation, yoga classes and round-trip transport from Chiang Mai airport.

The spa is located about 45 minutes from Chiang Mai airport in the sleepy rolling hills of Mae Rim. After twisting and turning off the main road and through a village we arrived at a place that can be described in three words: green, green and green. The sound of birds and bugs and the overwhelming aroma of every imaginable form of tropical plant-life signals departure from the concrete jungle and entry into the real one.

The Spa is spread out over 80,000 sqm of lush tropical vegetation that looks more like a mildly controlled jungle than manicured landscaping. Some 65 rooms and villas built in the old Lanna style blend seamlessly into the countryside.

The configuration is somewhat

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like a village with the world famous Radiance Organic Restaurant at its centre. Only a short stroll from the middle of the village is the Detox Centre, the Raw Foods Classroom, the spa/steam/massage centre, the beauty salon, the health director’s consultation centre and reception.

Upon arrival I was given a fistful of papers and instructions by the ever-so-helpful staff at reception. My room was poolside in a cozy little bungalow. The accommodations were simple but very comfortable and spacious with everything you’d expect in an upscale resort (except for a mini-bar filled with junk food). Without a doubt it was the most comfortable bed I’ve slept on in years.

Meeting point

The freshwater negative edge pool sits right in the middle of the resort rooms and is the meeting point for all the guests. Water spews out of the mouths of several ornate mythical creatures into the pool creating a constant sound of flowing water.

My first appointment of the afternoon was with the health director, a young doctor and on-site health counsellor who would explain the programme to me. He handed me

a printed step-by-step guide to assist me over the following eight days.

There are several programmes available, ranging from a simple quiet stay to a 10-day boot-camp for those heartier souls who want a serious physical challenge. Detox regimes come in a variety of approaches including the one I chose which included seven-and-a-half days of fasting, cleansing and meditation.

Raw food diet

After absorbing all the info and inventorying all the supplements and supplies I’d need, I was directed to the Radiance Organic Restaurant where I’d enjoy my last meal for a while. For this type of detox I needed a day on raw food only. This was my introduction to discipline because all the other stuff on the menu looked fabulous. For those that think vegetarian cuisine is boring, think again. But, like a good detox

disciple, I gorged myself on easily the best salad I’ve ever consumed and prepared to fast.

On the next day I started the fast by getting up at 6:30 and reporting to the detox centre. There I weighed in and was issued two packs of supplements which I was to consume every three hours until bedtime. And, I was given a pineapple-based “detox” drink full of fibre and nutrients. I would repeat this ritual every day for the next week.

The detox centre is where you’ll see all the other guests every day. Much of the staff, including the doctor and the yoga/meditation instructors also hung out there to answer any questions and discuss your personal health issues. There is also an extensive library of reading material on everything from Buddhism to herbal healing.

You might think being isolated on this rural hillside with a bunch of people you don’t know, without the

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luxury of social lubricants like alcohol or fancy clubs would get boring. But, the programme is designed to keep you busy and it does.

Every morning I’d report to the detox centre, slurp my morning drink and schlep up the hill to the yoga sala for meditation. The view from this gorgeous structure is ridiculously picturesque. The mountains with mist hovering over them, the resort down the hill and the dragon fruit farm right next door combine to create a view you only see in postcards.

Different sounds

I’ve tried meditation before and always needed the assistance of a CD with sounds of the ocean or a tropical rainforest to get me in the mood. At the yoga sala in Chiang Mai you are surrounded by a thousand different sounds. One of my fellow guests described it as a “bird disco”. For





sure they could record one of those meditation CDs from here. We had a different kind of meditation every day and learned several varied disciplines.

Mid-morning I'd report to the steam/spa/massage facility to sit in an immense herbal steam room before getting a massage specifically designed for detoxification. I always ended up snoring like a bear. Others I saw were having all kinds of treatments in the indoor/outdoor spa including ayurvedic sessions a few hours long.

In the afternoon I'd swim in the pool or take a hike up the hill to the big organic farm where all the fruits and vegetable for the restaurant are grown.

I was constantly consulting my schedule about when my next detox drink would be, when my next supplements would be consumed and when the next raw foods class was. I never got bored. I never felt alone.

And, most importantly, I never felt hungry.

Easily the biggest surprise for me was the wild combination of people I met. There was Reece and Connie, a couple of architects from Hong Kong who come every year. I met Patrick, a Frenchman working for Doctors Without Borders in the Congo. Alicia, a 60-something retiree from Scotland ... Rose, a teacher from Shanghai ... Franz, a retired CEO from Amsterdam ... Amira and Amen the charming sisters from Dubai ... all here to reclaim our bodies from the onslaught of modern culture.

One week

It was one week of my life without drinking or eating anything poisonous. It was one week of my life without dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. No cigarette smoke.

So, the next time you hear the term "medical tourism", make sure you understand the differences.

No diesel fumes. No trucks with loudspeakers blasting out some politician's appeal. Not a negative word was spoken. I slept 10 hours a night.

But, I know what you're thinking. All this peace, love and carrot juice is fine and dandy, but what were the results?

Well, I no longer feel "crappy". Pain in my back and shoulder is gone. The ringing in my ears that has plagued me for the past year has disappeared. My skin is clear, my eyes are bright and my synapses are firing like they did when I was a much younger man. And when I look in the mirror I see cheekbones and dimples I had forgotten about. In seven days I lost seven kilos.

So, the next time you hear the term "medical tourism", make sure you understand the difference between that and what they have in Chiang Mai. Go to Bumrungrad when you're sick. Come to Chiang Mai to stay well. |

