

BUTTBOOTCAMP

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A seven-day weight loss retreat traditionally starts with a binge. It's human nature to want more when you know you're going to pay for the privilege of being given less. Which is why I find myself mid flight to Thailand gorging on plane food and sneaking my neighbours roll when he's not looking.

DAY ONE

This is not just any old weight loss and fitness retreat. This is Chiva-Som – the doyenne of destination spas around the world. It's where the Fortune 500 and Hollywood's finest mix with European royalty.

Not everyone is on a weight loss and fitness regime, probably because not everyone has been overindulging like I have. Others are detoxing, de stressing or going holistic but eating and emotions go hand in hand for me and I know it's been a tough year when my middle is thick.

I have a tendency to be all or nothing and I am fearful my army of colonic irrigations, personal fitness sessions, power oxygen fitness, outdoor adventure training, myotherapy healing, acupuncture, Chinese stomach organ manipulation and oriental foot massages will only produce a desire to break free from the regime. Just to make it particularly difficult for myself I throw in a three-day cleanse but only after I have cleanse-envy watching the kilos fall off those around me who are surviving on the juice of a jackfruit blessed by nearby monks. I should know better, but hey, that's why I'm here.

All this scheduling for the week is enough to give me a headache and without thinking I reach for the mini bar in my villa, filled with sinless goodies, and devour an organic seed and nut bar. It doesn't help, the headache remains and I am told "it's part of the process." Thankfully so is a daily massage.



THIS PAGE: Traditional Chinese Medicine herbs. OPPOSITE PAGE: Tai Chi class; soothing massage. OPENING PAGES: Music therapy. All courtesy of Chiva-Som.

DAY TWO

I start the day vibrating. It's Danchai's fault. He's the meditation guru and he's brought a harp. We breathe to the beat of his string plucking while we wrestle with our thoughts for empty brain space. I succeed when I fall asleep, waking with drool on my chin as Danchai is thanking the class. There's a mix of folk in meditation and I fear the beautiful people are laughing at my inability to keep my unplumped lips together so I mingle with the other chubbies hoping I look thin by comparison. In this resort the other chubbies are the men; stressed out executives on a diet of French cuisine and late night cognacs with clients. It doesn't win me favours with the females.

It's not a great start to the day, but I'm not good without my morning latte and unless I want to hike kilometers into town I'm remaining caffeine free.

Health retreats attract an interesting crowd, expensive health retreats even more. Secretly I envy the blonde in the front meditation row her mammoth diamonds, hating her before I even know her name and hating myself for hating her. It would appear that my thoughts are louder inside my head when not numbed with sugar. This isn't going well.

The thinking has clearly been done for me at breakfast, which is a good thing. Calorie intake, protein grams and fat content are listed on the buffet. I'm hoping the Chiva-Som staff will sweat for me and may even take my colonic for me too.

A colonic irrigation is designed to cleanse the colon of a lifetime of toxins built up on the colonic wall. I spend half an hour cleansing my butt in my bathroom before my appointment, paranoid any trace elements of effluent will reveal I actually have a bowel. In fact I go so far as to shave it in the hope that will lessen any pain should a stray pubic hair get caught on the hose. I'm a colonic virgin, obviously, and thankfully a kind hearted nurse with a no nonsense approach removes any embarrassment.

As the water fills my bowel I fear a gas attack or worse, the hose will fall out and with it my innards. I begin to sweat and go hot and cold unsure whether it's a panic attack or a natural reaction to having an alien object inside my nether regions.

It's not an experience I would stand first in line for but it all goes well, (translation – I pooped into the hose), and I commit to return in two days time. I am certain the other guests can tell where I have been playing by looking at me so I retire behind dark glasses to the pool praying I don't experience any post colonic leakage.

Truth is I'm tired. Jetlag has kicked in, the colonic left me jaded and I have accepted an invitation from management to a BBQ dinner by the pool. I have the please-like-me gene and am scared of backing out lest I offend or worse, miss something.

A quick steam in the mammoth spa area complete with floating rose petals in a super cold plunge pool revives me long enough to swap retreat stories over a grilled dinner prawn and a glass of iced lemongrass tea that looks like wine. I'm hallucinating already. I'm stuck on a table for ten with some looking as delighted as I am to be there. Those at the end of their stay look sparkling and healthy and I hate their enthusiastic response to everything put before them. Jesus, it's nigh on impossible to screw up a bbq so stop raving about how fabulous the food is.

DAY THREE

When all decisions are taken away from one it is possible to still stress. What class will I do? Can I get away with wearing the same gym pants two days in a row? What if the trainer stretches me and can smell my sweat?

I'm finding it hard to stay away from the computer in the library. Email is an addiction difficult to break and when there are only two computers and a retreat filled with high-powered executives you can be guaranteed there's a line. I don't queue well.

It was a mistake checking emails. I can feel my heart pound inside my chest and my stomach lift, a physical reaction to the outside world of deadlines and expectations. A sour taste remains in my mouth as I head to the gym where I stare down the trainers who refuse to turn the music up to a level of my liking.

I'm a little grumpy, yes. I'm still not sleeping great and had a disturbing dream about an ex-boyfriend I thought I had long forgotten. It's left me sad and lonely and emphasized my single status, a status I thought I had no issue with.

I strap a mask to my face and suck in pure oxygen for half an hour on a treadmill with a physiotherapist. Why? It's supposed to improve fitness. It might do, but I what I really need is something to improve my mood.

DAY FOUR

I start the three-day cleanse and yes, I binged on the dinner menu last night in preparation. If you can call three courses that add up to 400 calories a binge. It's not too bad though, I had prunes and apple compote for breakfast. Thankfully I like both.

Today I meet Nok. She's my personal trainer. Nok in Thai means hell, or so it seems. Nok believes stairs are for running, hands are for boxing and legs are to be high kicked. I do what she says – she scares me.

Just to stress myself out more I go through a complicated ritual of booking then cancelling then rebooking treatments at the spa and holistic centre. Why? Because I can. I'm anxious or is that hungry? And obsessive behaviour is my mantra. It's hard to let go of control so I channel it into my schedule.

Meanwhile a maya tummy massage prepares my bowels for my next colonic. I'm mortified when the pressure from so much water in my colon pushes the speculum and hose out on the bed. Nothing leaks but I run to the toilet to relieve the rest of the water. Thank god the nurse is practical and wears latex gloves.

DAY FIVE

I take a bike ride with a trainer through a fishing village to the temple. He neglected to mention the temple was on the top of a mountain and that it came with stairs, many stairs. I am expected to climb them and like Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky* I do. Nothing is going to stop me today.

I even go for a floating meditation with Danchai in the indoor pool. He speaks through a microphone to some background music as we float on devices that make us weightless in the pool. I can't understand him when amplified so I drift off literally and figuratively.

It's been a better day. Even the five juices posing as meals didn't get me down.



DAY SIX

I woke this morning with a clear head and energized body. Nok is looking less scary and it's my final colonic. This time we're using coffee, no sugar. Apparently the caffeine will encourage my colon to 'move more.' I wonder if it comes with cake.

DAY SEVEN

My cleansing diet is over, food never tasted so good and the comments just keep on coming. Just quietly I am partial to a compliment and I strut around for more. I know I have lost weight, my clothes are looser and my stomach is flatter. As my body has changed so has my outlook with increased compassion for those around me.

Today I pamper up in the spa but not before a quick acupuncture treatment with Ken Rosen. I have been waiting for an emotional shift during the week, a moment of enlightenment, a release. When it didn't come I took the vitality I have been feeling as compensation. Half an hour with Ken changed that. Two pressure points in my face when touched with the acupuncture needle released a flood of sobbing tears. For or from what I do not know. I just let it happen.

DAY EIGHT

I hate good byes. I even hug Nok who has turned into an angel. Seven nights after arriving and I simply do not want to leave. When my consultant, Phoebe, declares I have lost 4.1kgs I calculate how much I could lose if I stayed till Easter. But it's no longer the weight loss I crave, it's the nurturing, the care and the kindness of Chiva-Som.

I feel lighter as a person, the world no longer weighing my shoulders down. Goal achieved.

Would I do it again? Where do I sign?

A seven-night retreat at Chiva-Som costs US\$4,760 upwards. Check out www.chivasom.com for more details.

