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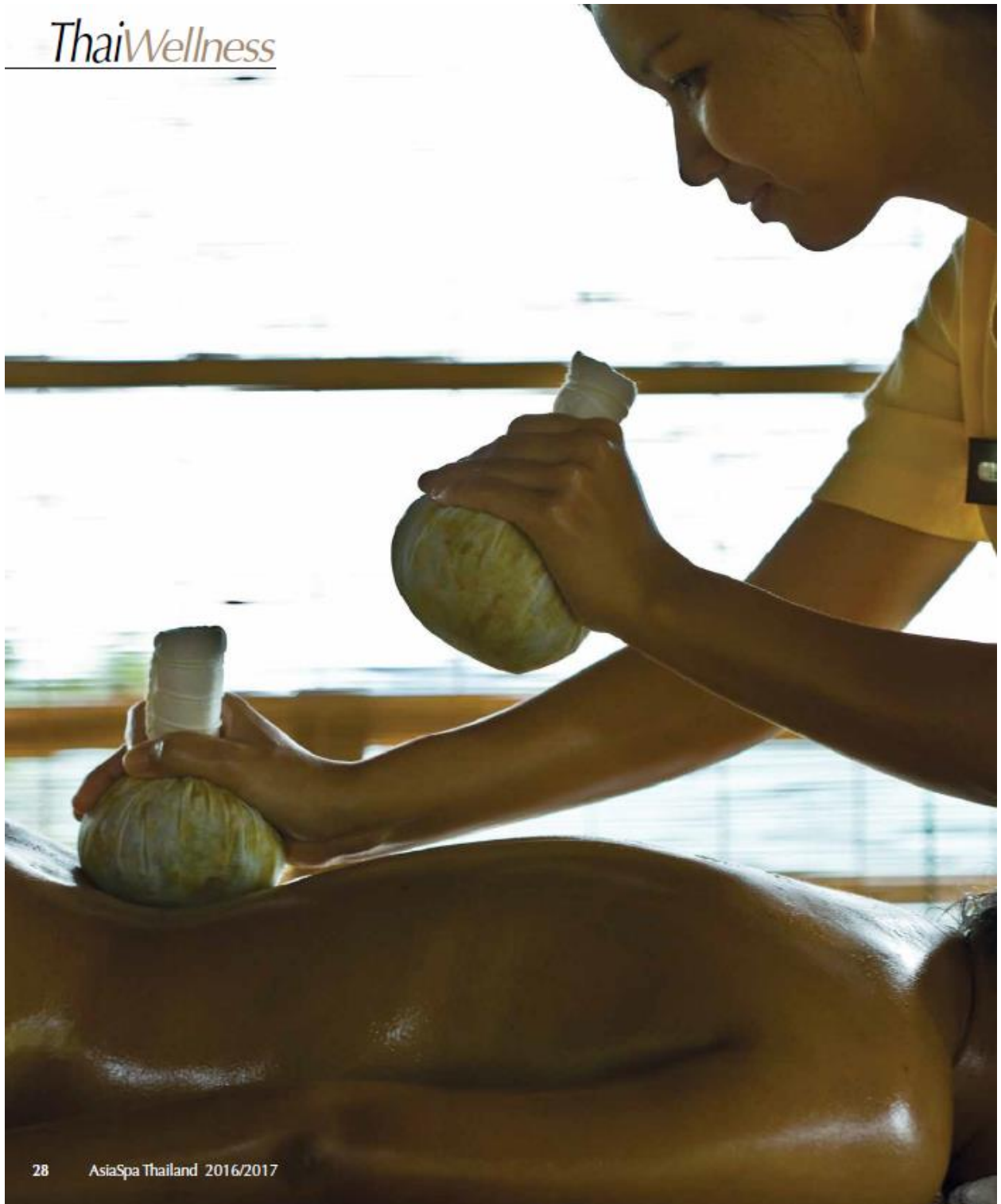
ADVENTURES  
IN HUA HIN

INSTAGRAM-  
WORTHY SPAS  
& RESORTS

THE SECRET  
TO THAI  
WELLNESS

+10  
TOP  
YOGA  
RETREATS





# Traditionally Thai

Thai treatments have long been a highlight on spa menus around the world and with good reason, boasting a long and fascinating medical history and treatments that really deliver results. But there's more to Thai therapies than just a yoga massage and herbal poultice

Writer Judy Chapman

Eastern medicine is an incredible treasure chest of botanical wisdom and time-honoured rituals, many of which have been transpired into exceptional Asian treatments. Some pay tribute to ancient ceremonies, others revisit beautifying practices from royal palaces, while others have been passed on through generations by monks or local village healers. What's inspiring is that many of these Eastern disciplines, such as yoga, are now being funded for research and proven scientifically as reputable health modalities.

These days you would be hard pressed not to find the Thai massage or herbal poultice at a luxury spa or wellness retreat. From Europe to Australia and across the Middle East, spa managers commonly reveal that Thai massage is one of the bestselling treatments on their menu.

Chami Jotikalikorn, journalist and author of the bestselling *Thai Spa Book* and *Thailand's Luxury Spas* has much to share on the topic. She says that Thai wellness stems from age-old herbal healing traditions rooted in Ayurvedic practices that were brought over from India by Buddhist missionary monks during the spread of Buddhism from India to Thailand.

"The monks brought Ayurvedic healing practices which were adapted into local herbal folk medicine and became Thai herbal

healing traditions," explains Jotikalikorn. "Many Thai favourites such as the herbal steam and herbal healing compresses come directly from ancient Indian Ayurvedic medicine."

## THAI MASSAGE

Probably the most respected Thai treatment is the traditional Thai massage and as Jotikalikorn explains, this is because it is more for health, achieving relaxation, invigoration, balance and improved circulation, prana, life force, chi, and energy flow. What makes this different also is that it is a fully-clothed experience with many of the movement resembling yoga. Specific points are pressed, limbs stretched, muscles compressed and circulation flows throughout.

"The Nuad Boran, for example, that we refer to as the Thai Yoga Massage, actually evolved over 2,000 years ago," says Jotikalikorn, adding that the founding father of Thai massage was an Ayurvedic doctor named Jivaka Kumar Bhacca, who is revered to this day throughout Thailand as the Father of Medicine. "He was born in India during the time of Buddha and is mentioned in a variety of ancient documents for his extraordinary medical skills, knowledge of herbal medicine and for having treated many important people of his day, including the Buddha himself," she says.

## ESSENCE OF WELLNESS

Ayurveda is all about balancing our doshas while in traditional Chinese medicine, the focus is about increasing our chi and circulation. So what is at the heart of Thai wellness traditions?

"Traditional Thai wellness treatments offer healing through the art of acupressure touch, herbal remedies, breathing and yoga-like stretching to allow the body's energy to flow more freely," says Vanessa Stoessel, director of Wellness & Spa Projects for MSPA International that includes the renowned Thai-born Anantara brand.

In her experience, the Thai people possess such an innate connection to healing the body through touch. Massage and traditional wellness practices are often taught in the home and administered from generation to generation as a normal way of life. "This led to a natural choice of career progression for many," she says.

While many healing traditions in Eastern cultures were passed down verbally through generations, in Thailand it was the Royal Court who kept ancient reference texts on the subject of traditional Thai medicine. However, Jotikalikorn reports sadly many were lost when Burmese invaders destroyed the old capital of Ayutthaya in 1767. The remaining fragments were commissioned to



be re-drawn as stone etchings by King Rama III in 1832, and today are on public display at the famous Wat Po temple complex (the temple of the reclining Buddha) in Bangkok.

## WAT PO TEMPLE – BIRTHPLACE OF MEDICINE AND MASSAGE

Wat Po is known as the birthplace for the traditional Thai massage and the earliest centre for education in religion, health and science. Still today, Wat Po remains the national headquarters and centre of training in Thai medicine and massage. It houses a school of Thai medicine teaching Thai medicine, Thai pharmacy, Thai medical practice, Thai midwifery and the Thai massage: perhaps this is one of the reasons that Thai treatments are so revered in spas?

And if you seek evidence of the respect of Ayurvedic medicine in Thai history then you only need to wander around Wat Po in Bangkok, where you can view intricate

murals, medical inscriptions, sculptures and illustrations on traditional Thai medicine. Among these are more than 60 plaques displaying herbal remedies, pressure points and energy pathways (known as 'sen' in Thai) that are the foundation of the traditional Thai massage.

## DISTINCT THAI TREATMENTS

Another revered Thai treatment believed to have its roots in India-Ayurvedic medicine is the herbal poultice (also known as herbal compress). This treatment has evolved over time with variations in countries including Malaysia, Indonesia and even the Maldives.

According to Florence Jaffre from the East-meets-West spa Ytsara brand, the Thai version *luk pra kob* was originally used to treat wounded soldiers during Thailand's Ayutthaya period between the 14th and 18th centuries: "It is essentially a heat therapy deriving from Ayurveda," she confirms.

The traditional Thai massage, Thai herbal compress, Royal Thai massage and the Thai

herbal steam are widely known around the world but what are some of the lesser known treatments?

On the menu at the spas at the Anantara hotels, they have drawn upon healing traditions from the Northern Thailand region for inspiration. Their Lanna Ritual treatment is, therefore, a blend of healing traditions from Thailand, Myanmar and Chinese, the countries that were represented in this Kingdom.

"In the late 13th century, the Lanna Kingdom covered most of present-day Northern Thailand as well as neighbouring parts of Myanmar, China and Laos," explains Stoessel, adding that the Chinese, Burmese and Thai massage techniques have a similar focus which is to encourage energy flow in the body through the use of acupressure techniques.

Another lesser-known Thai treatment is the Thai herbal steam that is on the menu at spas including Kamalaya and Tamarind Springs in Koh Samui. "The Thai herbal steam uses Thai medicinal herbs to clear the lungs, skin and circulation that are perfect for sinus

ailments,” says Jotikalikorn. She says there are also an entire range of old-school post-natal treatments involving heat and herbs to detoxify the body and get it back in shape after giving birth. “And we have traditional natural herbal hair treatments using kaffir lime and soapnut and butterfly pea, which are all indigenous Thai herbs.”

Ingredient-wise, it is interesting to observe that most traditional Thai treatments are all about ginger, plai and turmeric – all superfoods of our generation.

“Our Lanna treatments incorporates the healing ginger herb plai – also known as ‘poo loey’,” says Stoessel. “This herb has been used for centuries by traditional northern Thai healers for its ability to cool inflammation, ease digestion, joint pain, muscle aches and respiratory conditions, while calming, cleansing and nourishing skin.”

## LOOKING FORWARD

With all of these Thai wellness traditions and treatments deeply ingrained in Thai spas, will Thai treatments evolve or change in any way and do they need to?

Wellness destinations such as Kamalaya Wellness Sanctuary use traditional Thai treatments for modern diseases. A good example is their Traditional Asian Foot Massage with Warm Herbal Foot Bath that is part of their Sleep Enhancing Program. During this treatment, therapeutic herbs such as plai, ginger and lemongrass are infused to make a relaxing footbath. The warmth drains the energy down from the head, silencing the mind. The massage itself uses specific pressure points to systematically activate the nerve reflexes, thereby stimulating all body organs and tissues to improve overall function and wellbeing while calming the mind.

“Thai wellness is based on ancient natural healing traditions, so we probably won’t be getting any futuristic or technology driven Thai spa treatments right now,” concludes Jotikalikorn. However, she adds that Thailand itself is becoming known as one of the world’s best medical tourism hubs, evolving as a destination for healing and medicine. 🌿

## Five Popular Thai Treatments & Experience

### COMPRESS

Don’t miss the opportunity to try a Ytsara herbal compress created from lemongrass, ginger, plai and camphor. Usually given as part of a massage therapy, these pouches containing the herbs are steamed and pressed gently over various parts of the body to soothe and nurture. Works so well for any muscle or joint pain, particularly in the back and neck area.

**Where to try:** SO Sofitel Bangkok

### MUAY THAI

The national Thai sport that looks like martial arts and is also referred to as Thai boxing. Said to have developed several hundred years ago, the word ‘Muay’ actually derives from Sanskrit means ‘to bind together’, referring to the art of eight limbs that work in synergy to hook, jab, punch and kick. Explains Olympic Muay Thai trainer, Kru Yim at The Siam Bangkok: “Muay Thai is not simply a fighting sport, it also helps to increase your fitness and emotional condition. You will also experience spa treatments to ease any muscle tension.”

**Where to try:** The Siam Bangkok

### THAI HERBAL STEAM

The Herbal Steam Cave carved into natural rocks at Tamarind Springs is one of the most stunning natural experiences in Thailand. Through the gentle inhalation of locals herbs

and botanicals, circulation is stimulated to aid the removal of toxins through the skin and help clear respiratory passages.

**Where to try:** Tamarind Springs, Koh Samui

### ROYAL THAI MASSAGE

This massage feels deeply therapeutic for the mind and body and with good reason. Developed over thousands of years, the style comprises Ayurveda hatha yoga, Chinese meridian philosophy and indigenous Thai practices, acupressure, reflexology and gentle stretching – you are bound to depart feeling invigorated and stretched to your potential.

**Where to try:** Anantara Hua Hin Resort

### TRADITIONAL THAI MASSAGE

Try Kamalaya’s version of the Thai massage that is based on the discovery of 10 invisible energy lines called *sen*. It begins with a masterful combination of Thai stretching techniques and deep tissue pressure point massage to stimulate blood flow, release toxins and restore suppleness. A Thai Massage can help accelerate the pace of the detoxification process and reduce any discomfort. And as with most Thai massages, this treatment is available with or without the use of a hot herbal compress, which can help clear mental fog, soothe and calm the mind.

**Where to try:** Kamalaya Wellness Sanctuary, Koh Samui

