

Balancing act

A wellness tour of Thailand is enough to restore both body and soul, finds Ellie Ross



Acroyoga, Thailand
PICTURE: Ben Classica Photo

1he masseuse works her hands over the body, gently pushing her thumbs into pressure points along the back to knead out tension. She pulls, stretches and compresses the limbs, at one point straddling her client and rocking her entire torso back and forth.

This is Thai massage, an ancient healing practice said to relieve physical and emotional tension, boost energy and stimulate circulation. It was brought to Thailand from India 2,500 years ago and it's still widely practised today as a way to maintain good health, rather than pampering.

The only bizarre aspect in this scenario, however, is that I'm the one giving the massage. My 'client' is a fellow holidaymaker, whose body I am learning the ropes on. In a moment, I'll repay the favour and be her guinea pig.

We are at the Chetawan Wat Pho Traditional Massage School in Bangkok. But we're not simply lying back and receiving the treatment from the pros (though there will be an hour of that at the end). Instead, we are taught how to massage each other.

This hands-on experience is part of a nine-day Wellness Thailand tour from G Adventures. The company is known for adventure travel but branched out into wellness trips

to meet increasing demand from travellers looking for new ways to unwind, feel healthy and reconnect with the world – and themselves.

ON THE MOVE

The Thai massage lesson comes under the expert instruction of head masseuse Aey, and when it's my turn for a massage, my muscles melt beneath her dexterous hands. I feel relaxed and rejuvenated – appreciating it more having been taught the techniques myself.

Unlike traditional wellbeing holidays that confine you to one retreat, this guided trip allows clients to explore a variety of locations. From bustling Bangkok, we travel north to the jungle-clad hills of Chiang Mai and Pai, then onwards to the beaches of Koh Samui, via two internal flights. Clients can expect an action-packed itinerary including plenty of wellness activities – from yoga to a vegetarian cooking lesson – plus tours of markets and gilded temples along the way.

My group is guided by Moh, a wonderful tour leader who brings each destination alive with history and personal anecdotes. She talks about the story of the Buddha and the pride of the Thai people that they have never been colonised. She shows us how to season our noodles like a local ➤

DESTINATIONS

WELLNESS HOLIDAYS | THAILAND

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OF THE
BEST

ACTIVITIES

Muay Thai

This traditional martial art steps the energy up a notch, leaving clients sweating and smiling. Eight Limbs in Bangkok and Lanna Muay Thai Boxing Camp in Chiang Mai are good places to start.

Diving and snorkelling

If clients want to experience life underwater, head to Surin and Similan islands, home to some of the world's finest dive sites. The superb visibility (up to 35m), array of canyons and colourful clownfish are worth highlighting.

Hot springs

One of Thailand's best hot springs is in Pai. About four miles southwest of town, Tha Pai Hot Springs has a scenic stream that mixes in places with hot springs, while the Pai Hot Springs Spa Resort also has hot spring pools.

BOOK IT

G Adventures offers a nine-day TailorMade Wellness Thailand trip visiting Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pai and Koh Samui from £2,769 with a guide or £1,249 without. The price includes eight nights' accommodation, massage class at Wat Pho, internal flights, yoga, cooking class and stand-up paddleboarding. International flights excluded. gadventures.com



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Morning yoga session, Chiang Mai; refreshments in Bangkok; long-tail boat river trip; and a Thai cooking class PICTURES: Ben Glassco Photo



(with plenty of *prik nam som* sauce, made from chillies and vinegar) and reminds us never to point our feet towards a Buddha statue.

Our second stop is Chiang Mai, the former seat of the Lanna kingdom, where we make hot herbal compresses with Pat, whose family are Lanna descendants. Pat walks us through his garden, stopping to pluck lemongrass and ginger. Then we sit around his family table, pounding the ingredients in a pestle and mortar, wrapping them in muslin and steaming them. We hold the hot compresses on each other's necks and shoulders, feeling our muscles ease with a smell that's good enough to eat.

There is more food in store in Pai, a windy three-hour drive from Chiang Mai, where we learn to make traditional, soul-feeding dishes.

Lek runs VV Cafe with her husband Charlie, growing much of the produce on their farm. She meets us at the town's biggest fresh market, pointing out lemongrass, galangal and kaffir lime, then we head to Lek's restaurant where she shows us how to make everything from fresh spring rolls to massaman curry. As we sit down to eat together, everyone smiling and appreciating their creations, I can't help but feel there's something wonderfully therapeutic about cooking.

SOUL STRETCHING

Tucked away in a lush valley, Pai has a relaxed, hippy vibe, with lively bars, street stalls and handicraft shops. It's also home to Pai Yoga Shala, an open-air studio flanked by palm trees, where I have my first 'yoga wheel' experience, using a circular prop to roll out

“Lek points out lemongrass, galangal and kaffir lime in the market, then shows us how to make spring rolls and massaman curry

the spine, open the chest and side body, and intensify stretches. It's bliss for backbends – supporting my spine – and fun to try something different.

We're treated to five yoga classes throughout the trip, including sunset sessions by the sea that could make even the most-frazzled traveller find their zen. But it's these unusual varieties I enjoy most.

As well as wheel yoga, I try 'acroyoga', a cross with acrobatics, at beachside Peace Resort in Koh Samui. At first, the prospect of being launched into the air by instructor Kom fills me with fear. But he coaxes me into balancing on his hands and feet, my arms and legs outstretched, doing my best Superman impression. For a moment, I feel like I'm flying, my mind focused but blissfully free. Then I lose my form and am back down again, giddy for another go.

Our final sunset is spent stand-up paddleboarding off Bophut Beach in Koh Samui. Pink light shimmers on the water as I steady myself on my board, paddling in the Gulf of Thailand. As the sun dips beneath the horizon, I can't help feeling that, after nine days of wellness, this newfound balance might be sinking in for good. **TW**