

The hunt for the blue lotus


THAILAND'S LUXURY SPAS ARE THE PERFECT HAVENS FROM THE PRESSURES OF MODERN LIFE. ESCAPE TO THE ROYAL KINGDOM THROUGH GOLD AND SILVER CURTAINS TO REJUVENATE THE WORLD'S TWO MOST PRECIOUS COMMODITIES – THE BODY AND THE SOUL



Take a breath and come with me on a journey into an unseen world. Don't be scared, I'll lead the way and speak soothing words. I am on the hunt for the blue lotus and the secret of eternal youth. In the East, the lotus flower is a symbol of spiritual enlightenment; it grows in muddy waters and rises above the surface with remarkable beauty, representing long life, health, honour and luck. In particular, the blue lotus is one of the most ancient and elusive icons on the planet, a male symbol of the victory of the spirit over the senses, signifying the wisdom of knowledge. Or so says an ancient Thai dogma.

Yet this morning, the blue lotus is evidently nowhere to be seen. The refracted sight of me in a pair of disposable pants does not seem like the vision of a wise man. It's hardly flattering; but the disposable underwear look really doesn't suit anyone, not even if it's shiny red latex and worn by Superman.

Lately, in a world full of toxins, tantrums and told-you-so's, I have somehow forgotten amidst e-numbers and economics what I really need to own in order

to lead the ultimate luxury lifestyle: a healthy mind and a healthy body (tightly tucked under my Ralph Lauren shirt). And I admit my statistics are in need of a tune-up: I am 30-something-years-old, I don't exercise enough, I drink too much caffeine and the last time I saw a carrot it belonged to Bugs Bunny. I also suffer from repetitive strain injury of the rear from sitting on a hard office chair all day. It is this and numerous other flaws – did I mention I was going grey? – that has brought me to Mai Khao, on Phuket Island 

THE BLUE LOTUS IS ONE OF THE MOST ANCIENT AND ELUSIVE ICONS; A MALE SYMBOL OF THE VICTORY OF THE SPIRIT OVER THE SENSES





MESSAGE IS AS OLD AS HUMANITY ITSELF; IT HAS BEEN USED BY HEALING HANDS, WHICH CROSS FINGERS AND THUMBS, FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS

on the Andaman coast of Southern Thailand. Pandering to sybarites as much as burnt out businessmen, the world of the luxury spa is nowadays more suited to the kings

and queens of the stock exchange rather than economic paupers – the massage has long since forsaken the straw mat and shade of a lonely coconut tree. Money can buy everything, so why not peace of mind? Don't give me Lehman Brothers, please, I want lemon scented candles.

Massage is as old as humanity itself; it has been used by healing hands, which cross fingertips and thumbs, for thousands of years. As far back as 493 BC, a biblical reference documents daily massage with olive oil and myrrh as a part of the beauty regime of the wives of Xerxes. Ancient Greek physician and sandal wearer Hippocrates also wrote 30 years later that, "the physician must be experienced in many things, but assuredly in rubbing". His long white beard and flowing robes may have been a dead give away as to his scholarly status but apparently he could give a knee trembling massage from his clipped fingertips. From the ancient civilisations of Egypt and Mesopotamia to India and China, writings on massage have been etched across manuscripts and copper pots. In Romania, some illnesses were treated by a massage in which the client was trodden on by a tame bear.

I step into the unknown. Resembling a southern Thai village, the Anantara Spa is designed in harmony with nature on a secluded golden beach in northern Phuket. Crossing a lily-flower entrance, I am feverishly attended to by a troupe of beautiful girls, who strut from behind doorways like *Vogue* catwalk models, successfully slide off my velvet slippers, wrap me in a silk

dressing gown, place fridge-fresh towels on my forehead and tempt me with ginger tea laced with lemongrass. It is the ultimate in Thai hospitality and service. If only I could lead my whole life this way. It feels like a forbidden place and I am the most wanted man alive.

The master therapist Lek gently places a warm scented cloth over my face – could it be jasmine-flavoured chloroform? – and seconds later I am transported into the ether. Imagine a luxurious teak pavilion decorated with lily pads, lotus flowers, golden dinner gongs, indoor waterfalls and honey-coloured oil lamps. Ylang ylang, frangipani and lemon Frankincense hang in the air; peppermint spray and pyramids of kalamae sugar sweets lay on silver platters; wooden xylophones and sitars stir oriental hornbills from their morning song. The world is at peace for the first time I can remember. Above, the clouds rock gently back and forth with the snoring of the gods.

Lying spread out like a pregnant octopus, I could be in a Burmese opium den, smoke filled and carefree, with silver being rubbed into my wounds. As the healing hands work their ethereal magic, I am lifted through canopies of steaming clouds and mists back to 1351, somewhere along the banks of the Chao Phraya River in ancient Ayutthaya, the old capital of Thailand.

Thai massage – or *Nuat phaen boran* – took a few thousand years to get its oils flowing. In 5th Century BC India, legend has it that the Buddha befriended Dr Jivaka Kumarbhaccha, a famous Ayurvedic healer, who later travelled to Thailand, the crossroads for merchant trade between India and the Far East. Recognising the value of China's ancient medicine, he combined it with his Ayurvedic knowledge and Thai massage was born. The secret was guarded in Ayutthaya until 1767, when seeking to ensure these ancient traditions survived, King Rama III issued a regulation stating that all remnants had to be engraved on stone, ensuring that thousands of years of healing would never be lost. The epigraphs can still be seen in Bangkok's Wat Po monastery.

More than 300 years later, I come back to my senses. I have not been hypnotised, drugged or at the wheel of The Beatles' technicolour Yellow Submarine. During my two-hour appointment with the massage therapist



Left: Traditional Thai massage and the spa interiors at Anantara Phuket Resort and Spa
Above: Searching for the blue lotus at Si Kao
Next page: morning yoga on the romantic panorama of Pak Meng Beach

"THERE ARE MANY WAYS NOT TO DO THINGS HERE," WHISPERS LEK AS SHE COAXES ME BACK TO THE REAL WORLD. "LET US MAKE YOU A WONDERFUL STAY."

I have been treated to a Thai herbal compress massage, wrapped in a floral scented body scrub, experienced a lavender salt and orchid flower foot massage and been soaked in more oil than is needed to cleanse a new born baby's bottom. I already feel a renewed sense of grace and tranquillity. "There are many ways to not do things here," whispers Lek as she coaxes me back to the real world. "Let us make you a wonderful stay."

Wrapped in a cocoon of silk sheets and indigenous cloths, I emerge from its womb like a butterfly, wiser than I once was and not nearly half as wise as I once thought I should be at my age. The effects of the massage are clearly stronger than I thought. Suddenly, I am shaken and led back out through the doors of the spa, floating like a fairy. Hmm; I've never felt that before. I shine like a million silver dollars; and more importantly, I have caught my first glimpse of the blue lotus. I head to my personal swimming pool and villa to reflect.

Standing facing the direction of the sunrise with both feet touching together 24 hours later, I am re-energised. "Bring the hands together, palm-to-palm, at the heart," says Dr Gopal, the resident yoga master, who stretches out in front of me like an elastic band made of cheese. A naturopathic doctor





and wellness 360 degree consultant, Dr Gopal is the next step in the development of Thai spa.

I have travelled south on my journey through Siam to Anantara Si Kao and stand amidst a garden of galangal, ming aralia, kaffir lime and wild betel leaf bushes. I have been transported into the world's most luxurious botanical garden, which looks out onto the beaches of Pak Meng; an uncovered treasure bathed in Andaman blue. Built in a haven of mangrove forests and rubber plantations, the world of markets and share prices seems more than a world away.

"Energy flows in every living organism," says the doctor. "It is a phenomenon that is difficult to realise for Western thinking. When the flow of chi gets stuck or even stops, illness will appear." Immersing myself in a luxuriant embrace of lymphatic massage, therapeutic Hatha yoga and royal green teas, I can sense the presence of the blue lotus in the vicinity. The ancient texts read: "the spirit of the best of men is spotless, like the lotus in the muddy water which does not adhere to it." I already feel cleansed.

As part of my journey, I am taken on a spiritual trip to the emerald cave. Koh Mook, lies offshore by private speedboat charter and blossoms like a lotus flower from under the water. The cave, which can only be entered by swimming through a subterranean tunnel, stretches out into a cavern of jade – once it must surely have been home to the world's most precious stones. Reaching

THE ISLAND OF
KOH MOOK LIES
OFFSHORE AND
BLOSSOMS LIKE
A LOTUS FLOWER
FROM UNDER
THE WATER

a crystal clear beach, peppered with the finest silk sand, I have found paradise; and Leonardo Di Caprio is nowhere to be seen, thank god.

I feel my spirit soar. The last time I found myself questioning my wisdom, it was a different sort of eye-watering spirit that took over my senses – affecting my ability to walk in a straight line in particular. But this is different. I am submerged in the Andaman Sea shining on like a long lost crazy diamond, with mind and body in unity like notes played on a silver saxophone. The Dalia Lama? He isn't so daft.

My journey takes me from the luxury spas and southern waters of Si Kao in Trang province to the seething metropolis of Bangkok. Unlike 1930s Shanghai, cast in shadows by Herge's *Tintin*, the blue lotus I am hunting is the key to a man's soul and wellbeing. It is something far more potent than jungle narcotics or salty Captain Haddock whisky.

Bangkok's largest garden spa is serenely located in the sky. Or that's what it feels like in any case. Perched on the 19th floor in the financial district, the Banyan Tree's massage concept is unique in both design and flavour. Like the finest sommeliers of the Hotel George V in Paris or The Waldorf in New York, master therapists decide the most suitable treatments for a guest. It is an alternative to alternative therapies.

"Therapists can examine the body and decide what will be the best treatment for each guest," enthuses Joyce Ong, as we share warm chrysanthemum tea. "It's very unique and every

visitor will have a different experience. We create luxury and take you to a different world entirely." Chrysanthemum tea? What's happening to me? As I leave the empty jewel-shaped tea cup behind me, I can feel myself getting closer to the truth. I swear I can hear a golden cymbal tingling in my footsteps. Two hours later, and the master therapist has bent me into the shape of a golden banana through a combination of a royal Thai massage and a personal harmony massage. My healing journey through the wisdom of the ages may be complete.

I came on a journey. I came looking for wellbeing and spiritual cleansing. I met avocado, grape seed, white coconut, turmeric and seaweed body wraps and dined with fresh rock lobsters, tiger prawns and southern Thai crab. I left with a renewed sense of purpose, a strong sense of self and a new rule to get me through the next decade; never trust a pair of underwear not big enough to cover a house-mouse. My body is a temple is a cliché as old as the ping pong shows of Patpong, but I now feel like a gold plated house with a roof of gold leaf and walls thicker than the gold at the heart of the sun. I am a castle once more. ✚