

The Farm, Sala

by Verne Maree

The word 'spa' does not do it justice: The Farm is perhaps best described as a one-of-a-kind holistic health resort. It's a haven that you visit – either alone or with a partner or close friend – to cleanse your body, clear your mind and rebalance your life.





I went there alone, and in retrospect was glad I did.

The Farm at San Benito is literally a farm, 48 hectares of coconut and coffee plantation in the southern part of The Philippines. Fourteen hectares of it have been developed into a deeply beautiful, quiet retreat comprising just 28 rooms and villas. It's the inspired creation of German Eckard Rempe who, after many years in Asia, conceived and built it together with his Filipina wife, Perla.

Even if you don't take advantage of the many secluded meditation areas, just walking through the tranquil, leafy grounds dotted with lakes, pools and waterfalls is enough to calm your mind and lift your spirits. Sunlight filters through greenery; mossy flagstones and ivy-clad walls create cool, peaceful nooks; even the peacocks – usually noisy fowls – seem to respect the need for quietude.



There are no TVs or radios in the rooms, mobile phones are switched to silent mode, and staff motorbikes are parked a discreet distance away ... so you can hear birdsong, insect-chirrup, leaf-rustle and the breeze.

General manager Arlene greets me with literally open arms and the warmth of a favourite aunt. The welcome drink is cool coconut-water from their own palms.

My bag is swiftly trundled down intricate pathways to my garden villa, situated about five minutes' away from the main reception, restaurant and clinic area ... directionally challenged Verne had better remember the route back to the restaurant, as the sun is about to set! Happily, I'm right next to Salus Per Aqua, the spa, where heaven – and an infinity swimming-pool – awaits.





It's a lovely room. Three sides are floor-to-ceiling glass, with sliding doors and mosquito screens. In front is a patio and a softly lit, burbling fountain; to the rear a spacious bathroom and an alfresco marble tub and rain-shower; and my private garden is discreetly walled. It would be nice to share ... but oh, the luxury of having this private space and time all to myself!



Philosophy

It's largely up to you to decide what you want to get out of a stay at The Farm. It's equipped to offer you anything from a healthy and peaceful break from the world to a comprehensive programme of traditional, alternative and *avant garde* techniques to address weight problems, diabetes, hypertension, infertility, autoimmune diseases, digestive disorders, cardiovascular dysfunctions, allergies and many more.

At seven o'clock on my first morning, I stumble across two fellow-guests being guided through a session of 'Inner Power' exercises by Doctor Ella, who kindly invites me to join them. Patrick, a Brit, and Jan,





who's Dutch, are old friends who both live in Singapore. They come to The Farm every year for a week to detox.

To my surprise, they agree to be photographed – "Our wives know we're here," says Patrick. Don't they mind being left behind at home? "We bargain hard," according to Jan. "And there's not much mischief you can get up to at a health farm. For one thing, you're sober the whole time."

The Wellness Programme

Over lunch at the restaurant, director Domenick Vendetti – who, by the way, eats *only* raw food and is a shining example of health – tells me about the two main expressions of The Farm's philosophy: its wellness programme and its medical programme.


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“The Wellness programme introduces you to our philosophy,” he explains. “It includes a nutritional regime rich in fibre and live enzymes to stimulate and support the body in eliminating stored toxins.”

I’ve always enjoyed vegetarian food, but my three meals a day at The Farm’s vegan restaurant are a revelation, to put it mildly. Only vegan food is served – no protein, including dairy and eggs – and many of the vegetables and herbs are grown in their own garden. The restaurant’s name, 85/15, reflects the proportion of raw to cooked food; it’s either uncooked, or cooked at very low heat to preserve the integrity and efficacy of vitamins, minerals and enzymes.

But what most amazes me is the incredible taste and aesthetic beauty of every item in the three-course breakfasts, six-course lunches and five-course dinners. Chef Napoleon Arrieta can be justifiably proud of winning the 2006 Asia Spa magazine award for best spa food. (The photographs here are proof of the pudding, and they’re absolutely untouched and genuine: I took some of them myself.)



The Wellness Programme includes spa treatments to support the body’s inherent ability to heal itself. They’re interestingly varied, ranging from reflexology and a menu of massages and scrubs to *reiki* and touch therapy. I had three different treatments (a relaxation massage, a *hilot* massage and a purification massage and scrub) from three different therapists – Mitch, Fe and Olive – and they were all excellent. The idyllic spa itself is spacious and beautifully appointed, with indoor and outdoor treatment areas. All that’s lacking, for this water-baby anyway, is traditional hydrotherapy facilities such as sauna, steam and Jacuzzi-style baths.



Traditional Hilot

Filipinos have a natural healing tradition known as ‘hilot’ that goes back 1,500 years. It is still the predominant form of healing and is administered by traditional community healers, called *mangihilot*. Using a technique based on deep-tissue massage and bio-magnetic principles, practitioners manipulate certain pressure points to clear blockages in the system. The skills of the *mangihilot* are passed down through the generations by birthright, apprenticeship or self-study. It’s a deeply intuitive process: the best use their hands to scan the body and identify areas of energy imbalance; others use leaves or other objects.



Medical Programme

The Farm's team of five medical doctors is headed by the lovely Marian Alonso, who grew up in a traditional Filipino village. After doing her degree, she worked with cancer patients rejected by the hospitals, and spent some time with HIV patients in Johannesburg, South Africa; these experiences made her drop her plans to become a dermatologist – instead, she went to Switzerland to study natural medicine.

Marian describes three main factors that affect our health: genes, lifestyle and attitude, or consciousness. The first two are easily understood, I say, but

attitude? "Mental attitude affects the way the body functions," she explains. "Even if we eat healthily, if we don't positively enjoy what we are eating, we won't absorb its full value. An unhappy body closes down its receptors.

"Some of our guests may exercise regularly and eat well, but are still overweight because the body retains fat as a substitute for emotional comfort and warmth. Psycho-emotional therapy helps restore emotional balance, which can be an important step towards correcting a physical problem."

Live Blood Analysis

She performs a live blood test on me by taking a drop of blood from a finger, dabbing it on a slide and viewing it through a microscope – it's fascinating to see my own blood cells in action on the computer monitor. As blood cells live for up to 120 days, a drop of blood reveals the state of your health over that period. On the wall is a chart showing 'ideal' blood cells – round, well spaced, evenly sized – and also samples of blood affected by radiation (from computer monitors, long-haul flights and microwaved food), poor sleep, poor diet and so on.

I am dismayed to see my recent poor sleep patterns reflected in the pale patches in each red blood cell (low iron); enlarged cells called macrocytes that developed because my B-complex vitamins have been depleted by stress; squashed cells from computer-screen radiation; little scurrying bacteria-like shapes called prions indicating that I've been eating more

protein than my system can handle – those serial lamb racks at Cellar Door, no doubt; and murky fungal forms that are caused by blood-sugar spikes following a binge on crusty white bread, jelly-snakes or Old Jamaica rum. All my guilty secrets are out.

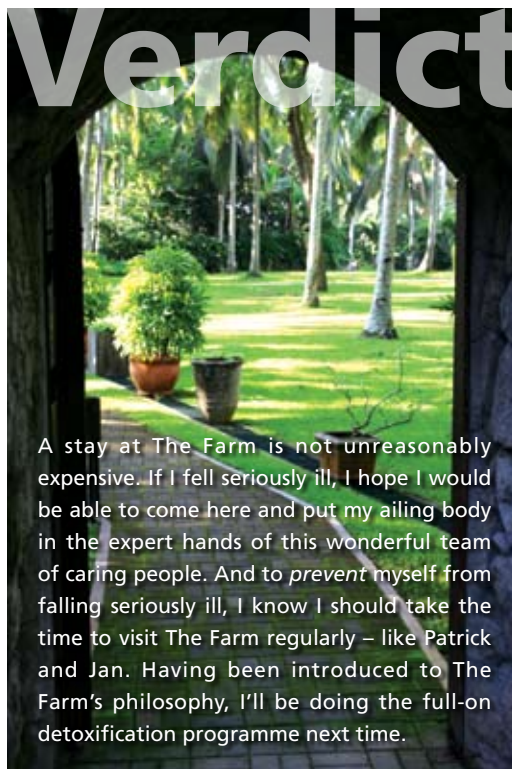
But I'm delighted to actually witness a plucky macrophage actively ingesting a uric acid crystal. You go, girl! Never mind that it's rather a waste of time, as by now the blood is well away from the scene of the crime.

Detoxification

Surprisingly, my live blood analysis reveals no sign of liver damage due to alcohol abuse, which shows up as spider-webs of lines in the blood plasma. So instead of undergoing the liver-detox treatment, Marian suggests colon hydrotherapy and kidney detox.

Everyone seems to be talking about colonic irrigation, which works to loosen and flush away the old, hardened faecal matter that builds up in the colon over time as a result of poor diet, constipation and so on, preventing it from doing its job. In this procedure, which last for 45 minutes, a qualified therapist inserts a speculum attached to a tube into the rectum and allows warm water to flow in slowly and circulate in the bowel. When you say so, she allows the water and waste matter to flow out through the tube, while she massages your tummy to encourage the release. This is repeated about three times. At the end, you have a couple of probiotic capsules to restore the good bacteria that have been flushed away along with the bad, and rest with a warm compress on your tummy and a cup of hot ginger and lemon tea – feeling so very, very clean! Thank you, Janet.

For the kidney detox treatment, Grace covered my body with a paste of activated charcoal powder mixed with warm water, mummified me in cling-film, wrapped me in a blanket and left me for 45 minutes to listen to a meditation tape – the time flew, perhaps because I slipped into snooze-mode. Charcoal is what they pump into the stomachs of people who have ingested poison: it's known to absorb toxins; and the skin is regarded as one's 'third kidney' because of its power to detoxify the body through judicious sweating. A small steamer was valiantly pumping away, but I didn't perspire much; I thought the treatment would have been even more effective in a proper steam room or sauna. **31**



A stay at The Farm is not unreasonably expensive. If I fell seriously ill, I hope I would be able to come here and put my ailing body in the expert hands of this wonderful team of caring people. And to *prevent* myself from falling seriously ill, I know I should take the time to visit The Farm regularly – like Patrick and Jan. Having been introduced to The Farm's philosophy, I'll be doing the full-on detoxification programme next time.

Getting There:

I fly Tiger Airways whenever possible, but in this case, it's better to choose an airline that flies into Manila's Nino Aquino Airport, rather than Clark Airport, which Tiger uses. The Farm is near Lipa City, about 80km south of Manila; Clark is about two hours north – the wrong direction. You can arrange with the resort to send a car and driver to pick you up.

For more, see <http://thefarm.com.ph>.